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Prologue

Hello, and welcome to the 5th book in my Warriors fanfiction "The Chosen Warrior" series. If you are new to these books, you should know that I use the same territories and characters as in the actual books, along with my own original characters. In "Starry Waters", I am using the characters that are listed in the allegiances in "Warriors: The Power of Three: Eclipse". The events that happened in the canon book will not happen in "Starry Waters", and the seasons may or may not be the same. (I go by my own seasons for each of my books.)

Here is a list of my characters that will appear in this book (2 are by name rather than appearance) in no particular order:

Leafsong - *pale ginger she-cat with a white left paw and white chest and green eyes; ThunderClan warrior; Chosen Warrior*

Redswirl - *black she-cat with green eyes and red fur on one side; ShadowClan warrior*

Swiftclaw - *white she-cat with black tail-tip and blue eyes; ex-WindClan warrior*

Owlheart - *brown she-cat with a white underbelly and chest, amber eyes; Dark Forest warrior*

Rainshine - *silver she-cat with darker gray spots and blue eyes; StarClan warrior; previous Chosen Warrior*

Whitesnake - *large gray tom with a white stripe running down the spine and green eyes; ThunderClan warrior*

Shiningice - *white she-cat dappled with silver spots and bright blue eyes; ThunderClan warrior*

Frostdrop - *silver she-cat dappled with white spots and dark blue eyes; ThunderClan warrior*

Darkpaw - *black tom with amber eyes; ThunderClan apprentice*

Dapplepaw - *brown she-cat with black spots and blue eyes; ThunderClan apprentice*

Brave - *brown tom with a black underbelly with green eyes*

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A tom lied on the gloomy forest's floor between gargantuan, tall tree trunks and prickly bushes, slowly opening his eyes. When he noticed the change of ground, he snapped his head up, glanced around his surroundings, and then swiftly stood up and unsheathed his sharp claws as he saw the she-cat sitting calmly with her tail neatly wrapped around her, watching him.

"Who are you?" he hissed at her, teeth bared and body crouched in preparation to spring forward. "Where am I? Why am I here?"

The she-cat did not flinch at all. "Calm down, tom," she ordered. "You don't need to worry; I won't hurt you... yet."

A few heartbeats passed. "Well?" the tom spoke impatiently. "Are you going to answer me?"

"The first two questions do not matter right now," the she-cat replied. "But you are here because I have an important task for you: There is a she-cat in the Clan territories that needs to die, and I want you to kill her."

The gray tom wore a face mixed with both confusion and shock. "I just met you, and you want me to *kill* a cat?" he asked unbelievably. "Why? What did she ever do?"

Narrowing her eyes a bit, she stated, "You ask a lot of questions, don't you?" then continued, "She, herself, is a killer, and, not only needs, but *deserves* to be punished by death. If you do this, tom, you will save many lives of cats in the Clans."

"What's in it for me?" the tom growled after a moment.

"Well," the she-cat began to answer, "you will have a lesser chance

of getting murdered. And...." She trailed off as she gracefully padded up to the tom, put her muzzle near his ear, and whispered something. Once she finished, she pulled back and returned to her original place, a grim smile now plastered on her face.

"You know?" the tom gasped, his eyes wide with astonishment.

The she-cat nodded her head, which the tom grew happy about, only to be let down by her response. "But I'm not the one to tell you," the she-cat replied simply. *"She* will tell you directly someday, and most likely reveal something else, too," she continued before the tom could utter any questions. Looking aside mischievously, she added, "I'm sure she will."

The she-cat turned back toward the tom. His eyes were gleaming with the hunger and excitement of the reward—especially one of them. He only gave a single sheer nod in acceptance.

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"But why?" a she-cat yowled in fury. "Why do we have to continue on doing this fox-hearted, mouse-brained thing?"

"Because this 'fox-hearted, mouse-brained thing' helps and prepares each one for what may happen in the future," a different she-cat hissed back.

"No," the first she-cat argued, "all it does is make you lose hope in everything and feel like no one cares about you anymore."

"It's for the good of the Clans," the second one reasoned through gritted teeth, trying very hard to keep herself from attacking the other she-cat.

"Can you really just sit back and watch as one of the greatest cats in the Clans struggles to protect *everyone?"* she wailed. "How did you even make it here?"

The second she-cat hissed, but did not answer either of the questions. *"Everyone* who is chosen has to do this. You did it."

The first snorted. "I know. And I *hated* it. It was *torture."*

The second she-cat narrowed her eyes at the aggravating cat for a few long heartbeats, and then scanned her gaze around the circle of five cats, including the two of them. "Let's vote, then," she suggested. "Those who say we continue the tradition, go on that side"—she flicked her tail to indicate the side—"and those who say we stop, or at least pause for now, the other." Right away, she walked over to the 'continue' side, and the other she-cat hurrying to the 'stop' side. The second she-cat nodded to a white tom. "You next."

With only a heartbeat's hesitation, the white tom joined the she-cat on the 'continue' side. He then motioned his tail to a ginger she-cat, who was wailing with shock and disappointment.

"How could you want it to continue?" she cried to him. "You don't want any more cats to suffer by the feeling of being abandoned, surely?"

The tom gazed at her with sorrow. "I'm sorry, my love, but it needs to continue. It strengthens the cats each generation, and they have a better chance of surviving and carrying out what they are supposed to do." His eyes were bright with hopefulness. "You understand that, don't you?"

The ginger she-cat slowly shook her head and then replied solemnly, "I can't say I do." She gradually dragged her feet over to the 'stop' side.

Only one cat remained to vote now. There were two cats on each side, meaning that whichever the last cat chose, it would win. One last she-cat stood between the two groups, staring at the ground for a few long moments in thought. Tension was rising by the time she took the first step, and toward the side she placed it caused the first she-cat who spoke to gasp.

"Why?" she yowled at her. "Out of any other cat, I would have thought that you'd be on my side!"

The last she-cat only turned her head away and murmured, "It has to continue."

Before the outburst went any further, the second she-cat spoke. "Then it is decided—we will continue it."

"Aren't you going to ask anyone else?" she hissed at her. "There are hundreds of more cats that deserve to pick a side, too."

"None of the others have anything to do with this," she reflected.

The she-cat narrowed her eyes. "Are you *really* sure about that?"

Silence commenced among the group of five cats as no one spoke. Tension was buzzing in the still air between the two quarreling she-cats, while the others were casting worried glanced at each other and looking back and forth between them.

Eventually, the more superior she-cat conversed, her voice low, "This meeting is over. You all may go and do your own things now."

Three of the five cats fled to somewhere other than the meeting area a heartbeat after they were dismissed, the other two staring at each other for a moment longer.

"Why?" the distressed she-cat queried the other.

But the she-cat did not answer; she only turned and hurried away, as if there was something important she needed to do. Though she knew she was just escaping from any more questions she did not want to reply to, she allowed her to go, staying where she was and watching her leave, thousands of questions swarming around in her head, the most occurring one being: *Why?*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sorry if the prologue was a bit confusing. Don't want to give too much away ;) But thank you for reading here so far! I hope you decide to read on ^-^

Remember to *Vote, Comment, Add,* and *Share!* :]

Chapter 1

"No, no! Help!"

A wailing broke through the peaceful, quiet den, seeming to echo outside a bit. A pale-ginger she-cat with a white chest and white left paw bolted upright, her forest-green eyes wide with terror, chest heaving with her panting. Figures around her stirred, and a few lifted their heads to glare at her.

"Can't you be quiet for *one night,* Leafsong?" a brown tabby tom hissed at her, his amber eyes gleaming from the shadows.

"I-I'm sorry, Dustpelt," Leafsong apologized. "It's just—"

"You know, some of us would love to fall asleep," growled a pure-white tom.

"Cloudtail—"

"And some of us have dawn patrol in the morning!" yowled a gray-flecked tom.

"Ashfur—"

Leafsong was interrupted as a wave of complaints crashed down onto her. The noise pointed at her made her shrink back and flatten her ears.

"Quiet!" a new voice rang out. Everyone turned to a different pale-ginger she-cat. "All of you are just making it worse," she meowed briskly. "Just let it be and go back to sleep."

Cloudtail snorted. "If we *can* fall asleep," he muttered.

"No, Sandstorm is right," a golden-brown furred tom insisted. "It's not Leafsong's fault for all of this. She's just having bad dreams. She can't control that."

Leafsong blinked gratefully at Brackenfur, and then Sandstorm. "Thank you, both of you," she voiced her appreciation, "but I do not want to disturb anyone any longer." She pushed herself to a standing position and began to walk toward the exit of the warriors' den. Before she left, she paused and looked back. "I'm sorry for keeping all of you up," Leafsong apologized. "I'll sleep elsewhere until these bad dreams clear away." She exited the den before anyone called her back and insisted she'd stay, but from what Leafsong could hear, no protests were made—only some whispers of gratefulness.

Love you, too, mouse-hearts, she muttered sarcastically in her head.

She silently padded across the bottom of the hollow and clambered up the pathway to the thorn tunnel, the rest of the camp quiet and peacefully sleeping. The she-cat pushed through the exit, the small, sharp points gently scraping her pelt. As she came out into the open forest, a delighted meow greeted her, causing her to turn her head to the source of it. Her eyes brightened up instantly at the sight of an orange she-cat.

"Hi, Leafsong!" Squirrelflight addressed to her eagerly. Her friendly emerald-green eyes looked concern. "Why are you up this late at night?"

Leafsong sighed. "I've been having nightmares for as long as I can remember," she confessed. "Apparently I have been yowling in my sleep and keeping everyone up. I decided that I will sleep somewhere else until these bad dreams disappear."

She expected to have to defend her choice, but what Squirrelflight gave in response shocked her a bit, and made her chest flutter in happiness.

"As long as you are all right with it," replied the dark ginger she-cat. She dipped her head slightly in acceptance. When she came to a straight position again, her crystalized-gaze glowed with love for a friend. "But if you need help with anything—and I mean *anything*—you know you can tell me." She took a pace forward and pressed her muzzle against Leafsong's cheek. "You know you can trust me, Leafsong," she sweetly whispered. Squirrelflight pulled back and

returned to her spot to guard the camp entrance. She gave a nod to Leafsong and then refocused her gaze to the woods beyond.

Leafsong gave a smile and began heading toward the lake, pausing and looking back to softly reply to Squirrelflight a 'thank you' before beginning the small trek.

Cool ferns brushed Leafsong's pelt as she walked past, the prickly grass swishing against her paws. The early greenleaf night was mild and calm, the gentle noise of crickets sounding. Eventually, the splashing of water came into earshot, signifying that she was nearing the lake. As the ThunderClan warrior went around a hazel bush, she gave a great gasp and rushed to the lake's shore, the stars of Silverpelt above reflecting brilliantly on the water's surface.

She allowed the sparkling water to pleasantly lap at her paws, almost as if it were welcoming her as a long lost friend. The glowing moon acted like a claw floating up high above, her ancestors in StarClan twinkling down on her, watching over the Clan territories. She took a deep breath in and then exhaled, taking in the beautiful-smelling night scents of the lake, forest, and stars. The scents of the Clans. The scent of what she needs to protect.

Leafsong's green eyes look up at the great dots of crystal light for a heartbeat before she closed them, dropping her head and flattening her ears slightly. She now stared at her paws underwater, and her face reflecting on the surface.*I'm the Chosen Warrior,* she told herself in her head, *my entire life revolves around protecting the Clans. It's what I was born to do.*

The warrior lifted her head and turned it to face the hills of WindClan's territory. An image of a white she-cat appeared in her mind, her blazing blue eyes saddened and her black-tipped tail down. The she-cat solemnly spun around, slowly dragging her paws up a hill, almost tripping ever now and again, head hanging.

Swiftclaw.

A cold shiver ran down Leafsong's spine as she thought of the poor former-WindClan warrior. Leafsong had made Swiftclaw leave the Clans forever to keep them safe. She had plotted along with the

Dark Forest warrior Owlheart to kill Leafsong by telling the Chosen Warrior she had to kill Squirrelflight. Leafsong had discovered the real plan right on time and punished Swiftclaw by exiling her, and apologized to Squirrelflight, renewing their friendship and admitting to her that she was the Chosen Warrior in the process.

But Swiftclaw was upset about her mate abandoning her, and sick of being tormented by other cats. All she wanted was to protect her kits.

Her kits.

If only Swiftclaw knew her three kits were safe in ThunderClan—for all she knew, a fox could have killed them, or they all starved to death.

Was driving her out a huge mistake? Leafsong wondered desperately. *Was it* necessary? She heaved a sigh and whirled around to face the forest and began to pad toward a gargantuan, towering tree known as the Ancient Oak.

She halted at the base of the tree, craning her neck back to stare up at the soaring trunk, the thick branches starting almost three badger-lengths above her head. She backed up a little and then readied her muscles to jump. The pale-ginger she-cat leapt onto the tree and clung to its bark for a heartbeat before bounding higher up the trunk.

Soon the first branches blurred past her. Leafsong kept going higher until she got to a branch in the middle of the tree that almost reached the lake's edge. She clambered onto it and carefully made her way to the end of it, the bark comfortably pressing into her paw pads. She then crouched down on the thick and sturdy branch at a point where the leaves did not cover a large portion of the majestic lake and stared out at the beauty below her.

StarClan, please tell me all the answers I need, Leafsong pleaded. *I cannot do this alone.*

"Please, help me!" she begged aloud.

She spent a long time searching the lake's refection for anything

that would help, but all it did was shine gloriously. The desperate she-cat eventually gave up, lowering her head and resting it on the bark, her eyes drooping shut in exhaustion.

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She was glaring up at nothing but a pale fog, fury and melancholy stirred up in her chest. She could not sense anything besides the invisible solidness beneath her paws and a cooling air. Her claws were out, and she could feel that her fur along her back was raised with rage.

Suddenly, her head jerked to look behind her. A silhouette in the shape of a cat stood there, the background showing the same fog she was staring at only heartbeats before. The mysterious cat had white eyes that seemed to glow like fire. She could feel her throat rumble as she growled something at the strange figure, but could not hear what she or the other cat meowed about.

Without warning, her view was turned away from the silhouette to look out at where she was facing before, still showing nothing but the fog. When her head was turned back to look at the shadow with glowing eyes again, she felt her eyes widen with shock as she saw the cat bounding toward her. Its claws glinted with maleficence as the character got closer and closer to her. At the last fox-length, the cat launched itself at her, claws sharp and spread out, getting in position to grab on to her and sink into her flesh.

Leafsong's head jolted upright, her eyes widened with terror. Her breaths came in ragged gasps, her whole body trembling in fear. Once she calmed down enough, she took a deep breath and gazed up at the sky through the gaps between the emerald green leaves—it was still dark out, but the sky towards WindClan territory was just beginning to lighten up a bit, indicating the soon arrival of the dawn sun.

I still have time to sleep, Leafsong thought gratefully. *Thank StarClan.*

She settled her head back down on the branch and closed her eyes, hoping to get a more decent sleep and fewer disturbances as she lost consciousness and entered a world covered with blackness.

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Chapter 2

The ThunderClan warrior woke to the comforting birdsong that was all around her. The fiery sun was just above the crest of WindClan's hills, the blue sky clear of any puffs of the white, fluffy clouds known to roam it. Leafsong breathed in the warm morning air and go ready for another day in the Clan life. Gratefully, no more nightmares had come to her when she fell asleep again, but it did not mean they were done for good.

She stretched out on the branch to awaken her muscles before standing up and turning around to climb down the Ancient Oak until she spotted a tuft of gray fur that was snagged by a stray twig. She straightened up a bit in alarm and hurried over to it. However, sniffing it did not do any good, as she could not pick up the scent. The alarm grew.

Is there a rogue nearby? Leafsong wondered frighteningly. *Were they here when I was sleeping, or did they come here moons ago, and their fur just stayed stuck here?* The thought of someone watching her sleep made her shudder. *They could have killed me...*

The Chosen Warrior...?

She took a deep breath and chook her pelt out, attempting to wipe away the thought, but the curiosity still clung to her mind. Forcing herself on, she scrambled down the trunk. Before she landed on solid ground, she tasted the air for any unfamiliar scents—none found—and then pushed off. Her paws fell onto the prickly grass, it already beginning to feel hot in the morning, despite being in the shade.

You would think that a fire would start soon, Leafsong commented in her mind, *but I know StarClan would make it rain by then, right?* She looked out at the lake and gave a small grin. *They wouldn't have that happen.*

Keeping her senses alert for any signs of a potential intruder in the territory, she made her way through the undergrowth on the floor of the forest, enjoying the early heat soaking into her pelt and the nature noises of birds, leaves, and wind. The thorn barrier of the camp came into view between a tree trunk and bracken frond. As Leafsong neared the thorn tunnel to enter into the hollow, it began shaking and popped an orange figure out of it. Right when the two she-cats saw each other, their identical green eyes lit up.

"Hi, Leafsong!" the orange she-cat greeted excitedly. "I was just coming to look for you with Darkpaw"—Squirrelflight nodded behind her as the black apprentice exited the tunnel and stood beside his mentor, his friendly gaze focusing on Leafsong immediately—"and then see how his fighting is coming along. I guess we can just start practicing straightaway, then." She began taking a few steps forward to go to the practice clearing, until Darkpaw started speaking.

"Squirrelflight, can Leafsong come practice with us?" he asked, his eyes bright with hope.

The she-cats looked at each other again, Squirrelflight's eyes happily gleaming, Leafsong's full of surprise, but a swirl of excitement grew within her.

"That's a great idea, Darkpaw," the orange warrior agreed. "I did not hear you mentioned by Brambleclaw, Leafsong. Since you aren't in any patrols today, you might as well join us." She paused. "That is, if you want to."

Leafsong was overflowing with joy. "I'd love to!" she accepted, looking cheerfully over at Darkpaw. He, too, seemed lighthearted.

Am I this *happy to practice fighting moves?* Leafsong wondered. *I guess it does give me extra training before any more fights or battles with other Clans...or cats trying to actually kill me.*

"Let's go," Darkpaw meowed, already walking towards the training clearing, leading the way. Leafsong glanced over at her friend, an expression on her face saying "Are you really allowing your apprentice lead the way, and not you?" Squirrelflight answered with

a shrug which sent back "Just let him. It's only to the practice clearing. And, besides, apprentices pretty much rule that place." They followed the black tom, not hurrying to reach the front of the group.

After a moment of traveling, Darkpaw disappeared into some bracken fronds, Leafsong and Squirrelflight trailing after him. They entered a vast, flat, mossy hollow, the floor soft and relaxing from the green plant covering the ground. Darkpaw was waiting patiently in the center of the clearing, ready for his mentor's order. He appeared to be more than happy with her dictate.

"Darkpaw, why don't you warm up with Leafsong?" Squirrelflight suggested, looking aside at the pale ginger she-cat.

The entering of an emotion that felt close to excitement fluttered in her chest. She and Darkpaw made eye contact as she approached him, automatically accepting the offer. The warrior crouched down a couple tail-lengths in front of him, readying for the first attack. "Show me what you got," Leafsong called, her eyes sparkling with diversion.

She barely had time to react as Darkpaw leapt at her a heartbeat after she finished speaking, the tom only swiping with a sheathed paw at the end of Leafsong's tail as she quickly dodged aside. As Darkpaw was regaining his balance, she thought swiftly and launched herself at his flank, the collision sending both tumbling across the mossy hollow.

When the rolling seized, Darkpaw was the one who landed on top, to Leafsong's small disappointment. The black tom's amber eyes twinkled with satisfaction, and he began pummeling her exposed belly, paws still soft with no uncovered claws.

With her greater strength, Leafsong twisted under the weight and finally managed to become free of the force holding her down, fleeing a couple fox-lengths away when she escaped. She spun around almost immediately and charged at Darkpaw, aiming to tackle his flank. The warrior pounced, paws in the air. A whisker-length before her out-stretched paws made contact with the black fur, the tom dodged to the side. Leafsong was able to control her

balance as she landed heavily on the ground, rushing at her opponent once again.

Her eyes narrowed with focus to watch what the apprentice would do next—he was crouching down, waiting for Leafsong to come closer. All of a sudden, he jerked to one side, as in a dodge. Leafsong made sure to follow him, but was turned into a fool for doing so—right after Darkpaw made the movement, he bolted for the other side, causing the she-cat to turn to follow him, but slipped on the moss and fell on her side with a thud. Before she could comprehend what had just happened, two paws pressed down on her flank. She gazed upward into two glittering amber orbs hovering above her.

"You give up?" Darkpaw asked, smirking.

Leafsong's mouth gaped open. "How did you learn that?" she questioned, not answering. She pushed herself off the ground as the apprentice hopped off her, shaking her pelt out. She moved her confused face toward Squirrelflight, who was sitting a few paces away. Her expression also looked shocked. "Did you teach him that?" Leafsong asked the orange warrior.

"No," she replied, her gaze moving from Darkpaw, to Leafsong, and back again, "I did not. Where *did* you learn that?"

The black tom shrugged. "It's instinct, I suppose," he responded simply. "When I'm fighting like that, my mind just takes control of everything."

Leafsong continued to stare at him, a bit more respect adding on to his character. "You are going to be a great fighter in battles, Darkpaw," she commented. "ThunderClan is lucky to have you."

She sucked in her breath quickly and snapped her head at Squirrelflight. *She doesn't know that Darkpaw is from ShadowClan,* she realized. *Does Darkpaw still remember where he came from? Or who his mother is, along with Dapplepaw?*

But that was moons ago.... Could they remember? She glanced at Darkpaw. *Should I tell at least Squirrelflight the truth? She kind of*

deserves it, after all. Plus, she is *his mentor....*

"Wow! Darkpaw, that was *amazing*!" yowled someone at the edge of the clearing. The three cats turned to see a brown she-cat with black spots sprinting in their direction, her lake blue eyes glimmering in the sunlight, a tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat following slowly behind her. The brown she-cat rammed into Darkpaw and head-butted him in his shoulder.

"Thanks, Dapplepaw," he purred back to his sister, nudging her cheek with his nose in return.

"That *was* amazing," Sorreltail agreed as she reached Squirrelflight. The warrior looked at the orange she-cat. "You taught him that?" she asked, looking slightly impressed.

Squirrelflight shook her head. "Nope. He said it was only instinct."

Sorreltail's eyes widened in surprise, and she turned to look at the apprentice, Leafsong and Squirrelflight following. Darkpaw and Dapplepaw were wrestling like kits, breaking apart as the warriors watched them, gazing up at the older cats innocently. The she-cats chuckled a bit.

"So, why did you and Dapplepaw come here, Sorreltail?" interrogated Squirrelflight, focusing her pupils on the other warrior. "I thought you two were going hunting together."

"Dapplepaw knew that Darkpaw had come here to practice fighting, so she begged me to take her here to train with him. Of course I eventually gave in." She rolled her eyes and meowed, "Apprentices."

"Hey," Leafsong interjected, "we were all apprentices at some point in our lives."

Sorreltail nodded her head. "True," she agreed.

Leafsong began padding toward the edge of the training hollow. "I'll leave you all to your training, then," she called over her shoulder as she left. She caught Darkpaw's eye one last time and nodded, approving his fighting skills. "See you later!" she yowled gleefully, looking straight ahead and climbing up the small slope through

some brush, into the forest.

Thoughts began to cloud her mind as she trekked back to the camp. *Redswirl would be so happy to know how Darkpaw's fighting skills are coming along. He's one of the best fighters as an apprentice I've seen, next to Lionpaw.... But what would happen if he had to fight a battle against ShadowClan? Surely Redswirl would avoid him. She wouldn't bear to hurt her own kits.*

The thorn barrier came into view beyond the tangled mass of vegetation. Leafsong steered herself toward the tunnel entrance.

But her own kits would *hurt her, a normal ShadowClan cat to them.*

*****

The warm grass touched the pads of her paws as Leafsong traveled underneath the blanket of leaves above her head, on her way to the Ancient Oak for another night of sleep outside the camp, being kind enough to keep her screams from nightmares out of her Clanmates' earshot. She didn't mind sleeping elsewhere of everyone else—it gave her more time to think, and out here by the lake, she felt much closer to StarClan—but she did wonder if they cared about her absence during the night. Another cat could find her in the branches and attack her. Only a small startle could cause the warrior to fall to her death. She shuddered at the thought of it.

That won't happen, though, she calmed herself. *StarClan will protect me in my sleep—nothing happened last night, and I even found some gray fur stuck on a twig this morning. A cat was probably up there with me at some point when I was asleep, or it could've just been old fur that was there before I came. Perhaps even fur blown from the wind and ended up trapped there? It could've killed me then and there, when I was not on guard of expecting.*

Before she knew it, the trunk of the lofty tree was in front of her. Leafsong pushed off the ground and clambered up, going to the branch where she had slept on last night.

The stars' reflection on the lake's still surface glimmered as bright as ever in a clear sky above. Her mind went back to the training

session with Darkpaw earlier today. She remembered the confidence in his motion, each fighting move strong with assurance. A strange emotion, unknown to Leafsong, dazzled in his eyes as well, making the amber orbs glow.

It must have been the trust in his fighting skills that was showing in his eyes, she figured. *Though wouldn't I have seen that before, in any other cat?* The she-cat shrugged. *Maybe I just haven't paid enough attention to it before.*

Random thoughts came to Leafsong's mind as her head rested on top of the branch supporting her. She was almost lost in unconscious sleep when a sound of swooshing leaves was heard behind her. She thought nothing of it, thinking it was the wind, until she noticed that the air was calm. Right when she realized this, a voice spoke, causing her to jump.

"Beautiful night out, isn't it?"

Leafsong spun around. "Whitesnake, how did you know I was up here?" she asked, her voice raised.

The gray tom shrugged, his white stripe glowing in the moonlight. "I followed your scent trail. And before you ask," he went on when Leafsong opened her mouth to speak, "I was just taking a walk through the forest. You know, a nightly stroll?" Whitesnake took a step forward. "Do you mind if I stay here for a bit until I head back?"

The she-cat smiled and shook her head. "Not at all. I was just going to sleep, but a few more moments of being up won't hurt." She turned toward the lake and sat down, leaning a bit to the side as Whitesnake sat down behind her to gaze out across the still water—there was not enough room to sit side-by-side on the branch.

Once again, Leafsong stared out at the star-dotted lake, conscious of the presence of a force behind her. Some heartbeats later, Whitesnake had reached forward so that their heads were next to each other.

"It's not as cool out as you would think it'd be, don't you think?" he

asked, his breath ruffling Leafsong's ear fur.

She glanced aside at him. "I know, right? I'm worried that there's going to be a fire somewhere, but I hope it will rain by then."

"It looks like there isn't as much water in the lake as there usually is," he commented. "Even the streams seem lower."

Leafsong sighed. "All we can do is hope, wait, and pray to StarClan. At least there is still water so we can drink."

The tom nodded a couple times. "True, true."

"I wonder how RiverClan is doing?" continued the pale ginger she-cat. "Are the fish abundant in their territory?"

"They *do* still have the option to hunt land prey," Whitesnake pointed out, tilting his head. "I don't see why to be concerned for them, or any other rival Clan."

The white left-pawed warrior looked at her companion, flicking an ear. "It's good to be concerned for other Clans every once in a while," she reflected. "Especially in this current state."

Oh, what would he know? He doesn't have the weight of the Clans' fate on his shoulders.

A couple more heartbeats passed before the tom backed up and stretched. "I'll best be on my way back to the camp," proclaimed Whitesnake, turning around to go down the tree. "See you tomorrow. Maybe we could persuade Brambleclaw to put us on a hunting patrol together or something?"

Leafsong swerved to look at him. "Maybe." She blinked, her green eyes glistening from the night's light. "Good night."

The gray warrior flicked his tail in farewell before he clambered down the trunk. She was left alone again, laying her chin on one of her front paws, closing her sparkling eyes. A slight grin grew on her face as sleep took her in and claimed her as its own.

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Chapter 3

"Ready, Leafsong?"

"I'm coming, Cloudtail!" the pale ginger she-cat hollered back at the white, long-furred warrior. She climbed up the slope to the camp's entrance. "Keep you fur on," she muttered jokingly as Cloudtail pushed through the tunnel, following after him. Exiting the thorn tunnel, Leafsong saw Cloudtail a few paw steps away next to Brightheart. Whitesnake was waiting beside the entrance for her, smiling at her as in a hello. Leafsong nodded in reply.

"I told you we could persuade Brambleclaw to put us on a hunting patrol together," the gray tom gloated, his head tilting at her.

Leafsong twitched her whiskers in amusement.

Cloudtail raised his tail to get the patrol's attention. "Brambleclaw told me to take us hunting along the WindClan border," he informed the others. "So, no, Whitesnake"—his bright blue eyes shot toward him—"we cannot hunt along the lake."

The white-striped tom frowned, but his gaze shone mischievously. "Oh, come on, Cloudtail. Don't you want to walk along the shoreline and look out at the lake?"

The white warrior's face was stone, no expression there that Leafsong could read. "No," he simply repeated, more firmly.

"You can dazzle at the lake on your free time," Brightheart added more onto Cloudtail's word. "But right now, it's time to hunt for your Clan."

Cloudtail brushed past his mate, nuzzling her cheek in appreciation. "We should get back before sunhigh in time for the meat." He began leading the way toward the shared stream with WindClan. "Let's go —we've wasted enough valuable time already." Brightheart

followed behind him, Whitesnake taking up the rear as he allowed Leafsong to go before him.

The patrol of four made their way closer to the border. As Leafsong climbed up a small slope and almost tripped over a stray bramble tendril, Cloudtail and Brightheart halted, their ears pricked. Instead of asking what was going on, she followed their gazes. Eventually, she spotted a squirrel scuffling around in the grass for nuts. Cloudtail motioned for Leafsong and Whitesnake to get down and for Brightheart to circle to one side of the prey while he was on the opposite side.

Leafsong watched the two warriors creep up on the unaware squirrel, crouched next to Whitesnake, their pelts a whisker-length apart. She glanced aside to see the muscular tom focusing on the soon-to-be fresh-kill. The she-cat mimicked him.

With the hunting strategy planned out, Cloudtail shot forward, but did not attack the squirrel. The sudden motion startled the small animal, sending it skittering away from him to where it thought it would be safe. As it reached a holly bush, Brightheart darted out from behind the plant, stopping the fleeing prey in its tracks and slamming a heavy paw down on it, breaking the spine. All went smoothly despite the ginger-patched she-cat's scar on one side of her face and torn out eye.

"Perfect!" Cloudtail yowled happily, trotting over to the fresh-kill and giving it a sniff. "Great catch." He nodded at Brightheart. "It's a nice, juicy piece of prey. I bet Honeypaw would beg to have it."

The she-cat grinned at him. "I bet she will, too."

Whitesnake began padding happily over to them, Leafsong following close behind. "That was impressive!" he commented enthusiastically. The tom glanced aside, as if thinking. "Hey, why don't we play a game?"

Cloudtail sighed heavily and growled, "Whitesnake, we are on a patrol. Stop acting like a kit. There is no time—"

"No, it goes along with the hunting patrol," the gray tom

interrupted. "In fact, it will help it."

The patrol leader remained quiet for a long heartbeat. "Go on," he muttered, his blue gaze lighting with interest.

Whitesnake straightened up a bit and explained. "We all split up and hunt for our own piece of prey. Once we catch it, we'll meet at...." He paused as he searched around for a good landmark. His gaze landed on a small oak sapling sticking up above the ground and bounced over to it. "Meet at this young sapling," the tom yowled back to the others, "once you catch your prey. The first one here wins!" Looking pleased with his idea, he returned to Leafsong's side.

Cloudtail seemed impressed, while Brightheart looked excited and asked, "What will the prize be for the winner?"

Whitesnake shrugged. "First pick from the fresh-kill pile?" he suggested.

The ginger-patched warrior's one eye sparkled. "Alright, I'll take that!" she accepted.

Whitesnake looked aside at Leafsong. "Would you like to do it, Leafsong?"

"Of course I'm doing it!" the single white-pawed she-cat exclaimed joyfully. "It's an outstanding idea; the Clan should do this more often." She was quivering with anticipation.

"Please, Cloudtail?" the tom's mate purred sweetly.

The strong, white warrior needed no more before he spoke. "Fine," he gave in easily. Leafsong could sense a small wave of excitement coming off of him. "I suppose it will help us to not only get more prey for the Clan, but will also testing who is the best hunter out of us four." His eyes swirled with mischief, confident that he would win with his extraordinary tracking skills.

Leafsong narrowed her eyes at him with determination. *We'll see who the true winner is,* she growled in her head. "When do we start?"

"Now!" Whitesnake yowled immediately, already racing away through the forest to find any hint of prey. The three other warriors dissipated, all going their own separate ways.

Leafsong weaved her way among the undergrowth, sprinting toward the boundary with WindClan. After a while of running, the she-cat slowed down into a trot, and then eventually to walking. She opened her mouth wide, allowing the forest's scents to flood into it: fresh leaves, dry grass, the faint taste of the fish-filled lake, and, what was exactly what she was searching for, the scent of a mouse.

The green-eyed warrior raked her gaze across the forest floor, eventually falling upon a ball of soft, gray fur, moving side to side gradually while scuffling around for a snack near a hazel bush. Leafsong instantly crouched down, stealthily creeping up on her prey too busy to notice her presence. Her paws moved forward, lifting and landing as silently as a calm breeze. Once she got a tail-length behind the mouse, she checked her paws for balance, waggled her hindquarters, and then pounced. The small creature's flesh was warm beneath her paws that landed on it. She allowed the critter to struggle in an attempt to escape for a couple of heartbeats before she bent down and bit its neck, breaking it. The mouse suddenly went limp underneath her paw as its life slipped away from it.

Perfect, she thought. *Looks like I'm the one who wins!*

She began picking up the fresh-kill in her mouth, but stopped as some blades of grass swishing caught her attention. A different mouse appeared and streaked across the small gap between the trees and bushes, passing Leafsong by a badger-length. The she-cat began chasing after it immediately.

Why bring one back when I can bring two? She purred as she ran.

The white-pawed warrior was barely a fox-length away until the predator and the prey burst out of the brush and entered a clearing by the stream between ThunderClan and WindClan territory. Leafsong skidded to a halt as she froze in the spot, her expression horrified with the memory that came with it. The mouse continued

fleeing, hiding back in the forest's plentiful vegetation.

This was where Leafsong and Swiftclaw had fought.

This was where Swiftclaw ran away due to Leafsong telling her to.

This was where Squirrelflight would have died at either Swiftclaw or Leafsong's paws, maybe even both.

A shudder went through Leafsong's entire body as the memory flooded into her mind. Her muscles tensed, and the fur along her spine lifted, her heart beating quicker.

StarClan had told Leafsong to do what she thought was correct for the sake of protecting the Clans. She had driven Swiftclaw out instead of killing her. But was that the right thing to do? Rainshine, the Chosen Warrior who had existed before Leafsong, had told her that she did the right thing by telling Swiftclaw to leave. Swiftclaw was attempting to kill her, the Chosen Warrior, yes—but she was only angry at her mate who had abandoned her and her kits, and all her Clanmates who's shunned her for her family. The white WindClan she-cat could have made a great future still in her home Clan, or perhaps live as a loner at the horseplace? Convincing her to run away from the Clans had seemed like the only thing Leafsong could do at the time besides killing her, although her thoughts weren't very clear at the brink of death.

And I told Swiftclaw to never come back, Leafsong remembered painfully. The thought has struck her like a badger raking its powerful claws along her flank, causing her to fall over on her side. The pale-ginger warrior's claws unsheathed, digging deep into the soil and tearing the grass up.

"StarClan, what have I done?" she yowled out to no one in particular. A fresh pang of alarm grew within her.

StarClan.

She hasn't seen or even heard StarClan speak to her since the apprentice and warrior ceremonies, which were almost four moons from now. Leafsong wondered why her ancestors haven't visited

her, even for a short time. Where was Rainshine, or Spottedleaf? Her parents, Goldenfur and Whitefang? A sickening thought that poisoned her head made it even worse.

What if StarClan have abandoned me?

Her breaths began to come in quick gasps, her heart pounding like a rabbit's feet thumping away, fleeing from its stalker. The blood roared in her ears, drowning out the stream's gurgling that was only two fox-lengths away from her.

No, that's nonsense! the agony-filled she-cat argued with herself. *StarClan have told me that they are always with me....*

They—they didn't lie to me, did they? Leafsong's vision became darkened around the edges. *StarClan doesn't lie....*

Her gaze was unblinking as the darkness intensified enough until she could barely see the blades of grass in front of her face as her body twitched violently. A couple last thoughts echoed in her mind as her vision was completely engulfed in blackness, her surroundings disappearing as if all her senses went numb.

StarClan has abandoned me.

StarClan has abandoned their Chosen Warrior.

*****

Leafsong's sight gradually came into focus as she regained consciousness. Her head felt hollow and painful, different from when thoughts were twirling in her mind like a vicious cyclone. However, she did recognize where she was at.

The light pelted warrior was sprawled out on top of a bed of soft moss and ferns. The stone walls of the medicine den stretched up in any direction, only the exit on one side with lichen trailing down from it allowing light to seep into the dim chasm. The silvery light indicated that the moon and stars were active in the night sky. It took a while for her to notice the two figures at the very back of the den, and as she did, the larger one faced her, the familiar face showing up a bit in the night illumination.

"You're finally awake," the pale brown tabby she-cat purred joyfully, her amber eyes twinkling brightly.

Leafsong attempted to lift her head, but the agony forced her to stay where she was. Instead, she croaked out weakly, "I am. What happened to me? I was just out hunting, and then—" She stopped as an immense pang rushed throughout her head and constrained her to release a hoarse cry that echoed in the small cavern.

Leafpool was instantly by her side, crouched down and a gentle paw resting on Leafsong's flank. As the yowl subsided, the medicine cat meowed in a soft voice, "Do not talk—it will only make it worse. Whitesnake found you lying unconscious by the stream next to WindClan. It seemed that you fainted for some reason." She paused for a moment, a look of slight confusion plastered to her face. "Get some more rest, Leafsong. I do not know of any herb that would speed this healing process up. I gave you some poppy seeds when Whitesnake and Cloudtail carried you in earlier today, but it seems like it didn't work; poppy seeds must be too weak." With a last look at the she-cat, Leafpool returned to the back of the den and curled up in her nest, falling asleep almost immediately; it was obvious that she was up all night, waiting for Leafsong to regain consciousness.

Leafsong did as she was told and closed her eyes. Not long after she did, her eyes opened into slits as she felt the presence of someone in front of her.

Rainshine?

Her heart sped up in excitement at the thought of StarClan actually not abandoning her. But that good feeling soon faded when she remembered the other cat who was next to Leafpool at the back of the den.

"What do you want, Jaypaw?" Leafsong rasped out quietly, not just to keep more pain from coming, but also to not disturb Leafpool. Her tone was not the friendliest.

She and the medicine cat apprentice had not had the best relationship with each other since Leafsong found out that she was

the Chosen Warrior. However, since Jaypaw had told Leafsong that Swiftclaw and Owlheart, a she-cat who trains Leafsong in a place called the Dark Forest, had been tricking Leafsong into almost killing Squirrelflight just for their own purpose, her mood toward him was raised a small bit. Leafsong soon found out that Swiftclaw was lying to her in order to kill *her,* but she hasn't seen Owlheart or even woken up in the Dark Forest as she slept since before the confrontation.

Though the gray tabby tom was blind, the warrior could still feel his clouded gaze resting upon her through the dimness. Instead of a snappy retort that Leafsong was slightly expecting, Jaypaw meowed after a moment, almost wistfully, "You are pained. You are angry with yourself at what you have done, regret. And you do not know what to do, because you feel as if StarClan has abandoned you. Your own parents are not speaking to you."

Silence rang out in the den. After a long moment, Leafsong choked out quieter than a whisper, her voice shaking a bit, "H-how do you know all of that? I did not speak of it."

Am I dreaming?

Jaypaw only shrugged. "I have my ways." He shocked her again as he continued, "And, no, you are not dreaming." The apprentice went to the back of the den and lied down in his nest next to his mentor. He looked at the awestruck warrior and murmured lastly, "Remember, you are a warrior—more than that. You can take care of yourself, guide yourself. You have your own opinions and thoughts; why not use them, and trust in your own instincts, you own heart?"

Leafsong stared at the apprentice as he closed his eyes and fell asleep. His words seemed way wiser for a cat that young to speak, almost as if one of the elders had told Jaypaw those exact words. Finding that she was speechless, the she-cat lowered her head onto her moss nest and shut her eyes in an attempt to fall asleep, failing to do so as Jaypaw's sage words repeated themselves over and over in her head, making Leafsong's theory of StarClan's abandonment confirmed. StarClan had abandoned her. StarClan had abandoned their Chosen Warrior.

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Chapter 4

It has been three days since Leafsong first came into the medicine den for recovery. The pain in her head had subsided a lot since then to a small pang that was bearable when she talked for a certain amount of time. She was able to pull herself up to a sitting position and walk around until she lost her balance on her weakened legs. Everything seemed to be going well for her, except that she refused to eat.

The constant reminder that StarClan is no longer with her caused Leafsong to fall into a sort of depression. If a piece of fresh-kill was brought to her and set down in front of her nose, she would turn her head away from it and, even though Leafpool would argue with her to eat, say nothing.

"The Chosen Warrior needs to regain and keep her strength up to be ready for what comes next," the medicine cat would say sternly regularly when she and Leafsong were the only ones in or near the den.

There is no Chosen Warrior without StarClan, the pale-ginger she-cat would think back as a retort each time as a response while her mouth stayed shut. *You're the medicine cat—talk with StarClan! Do* something! *Or has StarClan left you, too?* The thought made her heart plummet.

Leafsong was lying in her nest on the floor of the medicine den, a warm thrush sitting at her paws, once again untouched like every other fresh-kill that was given to her for the past few days. Leafpool had gone out of the camp to search for some new shoots of marigold. However, she was not the only presence in the stone den.

The medicine cat apprentice was busying himself by cleaning out the herb storage, setting the old and rotten plants in a pile to the side and reorganizing the new and fresh ones. Neither Jaypaw nor Leafsong had spoken once about the strange, quick conversation

they exchanged on Leafsong's first night of her staying in the den.

Until now.

"Why did you tell me all of that, Jaypaw?" the she-cat asked cautiously, hoping that he would know right away what she was talking about. "How did you know all of it?"

Leafsong was beginning to think that she hadn't been hard after a long moment of silence, but eventually the gray tabby tom opened his mouth and responded with exactly what he answered last time: "I have my ways."

A prickle of annoyance itched the warrior's pale-ginger pelt. "Then what *are* your ways?" She barely caught herself before she yowled it loudly. "How did you know? It only happened that day!"

Jaypaw's clouded, blind eyes snapped up to meet Leafsong's. A fire was almost visible in them with the fierceness of his gaze, making Leafsong grow uncomfortable. "I just know," he growled in a strict, low voice.

She narrowed her eyes. There was no logical reason of how the apprentice found out on his own, surely? Had someone told him? But who would it be, since she had never spoken her thoughts aloud?

Perhaps StarClan told him, Leafsong thought, a small flame of hope igniting in her chest. However, it was quickly put out again at the memory of the rest of Jaypaw's words. A spark of frustration burned in place of the ember as the stubborn tom refused to give one of the answers she hungered for. "What of the other half, then?" she pushed on. She wanted at least *one* answer.

This time Leafsong was shocked to see him look at her again, but with seriousness and calmness. The fading of the previous anger was practically visible, the atmosphere in the closed-in den changing rapidly to a much lighter one. "Common sense, I suppose." He shrugged, and his voice was smooth and quiet. "Every cat deserves to take care of themselves, if they really want to. To see if you can manage to survive on your own." He paused for a short

heartbeat. "To be your own leader, of a sort."

Silence stretched out between the two after Jaypaw's last words. Sightless or not, they stared into each other's eyes until the apprentice broke the trance by moving forward to exit the den and meowing simply, "I need to check on Mousefur's pads; the dry air is causing them to crack."

Leafsong was then left alone in the medicine den as the gray tabby tail swished out of sight. Emotionlessly, she moved her gaze to the dead thrush that was still lying limply near her paws. With the words lingering freshly in her mind, she slowly tugged the fresh-kill closer to her and ate it in small bites, chewing thoughtfully.

To be my own leader? Leafsong thought. *I guess I will have to do exactly that, since....* A small swirl of fury began to stir inside of her. *Since StarClan doesn't care about their Chosen Warrior. I'll use my own instincts; a warrior is born with their own instincts for battle and hunting, sure, but how about making their own decisions?*

She took another bite from the thrush, this one fierce and hard, teeth sinking deep into the slightly warm flesh. *If StarClan abandoned me,* she growled in her head as aggressively as if she were facing her worst enemy on the battlefield, *then I will abandon StarClan.*

*****

It was just after sunhigh. Leafpool was leading Leafsong slowly down from the medicine den to the hollow floor. The medicine cat had had her walk around the camp like this daily to get her walking confident and back to normal.

As she steadily circled around the camp, Leafsong concentrated hard on where her paws were being placed down from underneath her. Leafpool walked patiently beside her, studying her movements and steps as a hawk would spy on its prey before swooping in for the kill.

After a few laps around the hollow, Leafpool asked, "How are you feeling?"

Leafsong knew this was coming, since she was asked that each day she did this exercise. "Not as exhausted as yesterday, thankfully," the warrior responded. "I feel like I can walk with more balance than before, but it can still take up some focus."

The tabby she-cat nodded with shimmering amber eyes, obviously pleased. "That's great! You'll be back to your normal walking pattern by the end of tomorrow, surely."

Leafsong smiled slightly, relieved that she would be able to take part in Clan patrols again and not feel like a waste of space, just another useless mouth to feed.

"Leafsong!"

At the call of her name, the she-cat turned toward the source. Two bundles of fur raced for her, the one in front skidding to a stop before crashing into her. However, the she-cat trailing closely behind ran directly into the tom, causing both of them to fall to the ground. Leafsong closed her eyes and ducked her head to somewhat shield them from the spray of dirt the two apprentices stirred up. When she opened them again she saw Darkpaw squashed underneath the weight of Dapplepaw.

"Get...err...off of me, Dapplepaw!" the black tom grunted. His sister obeyed and hopped off. Darkpaw pushed himself up and shook out the dust from his pelt.

"Sorry, but you could have warned me before you froze like that," stated the black-dotted brown she-cat between licks on her shoulder.

Darkpaw cast a mischievous glance at her and looked like he was going to say a smart remark or repay with a tackle of his own, but left it for the reason why he had charged over so quickly in the first place.

"Leafsong," he greeted joyfully, "it's so good to see you walking—to see you, period, really! I've been so busy lately; Squirrelflight has been training me extra hard these past few days. She says that I am skilled enough to handle learning new things quickly, including

battle moves."

Pride began to swell in Leafsong's chest at the apprentice, who was almost as tall as her, his broad shoulders making him look big. "That's great news, Darkpaw!" she praised. "What of you, Dapplepaw?"

The brown she-cat shrugged. "Eh. I try my best, but now Darkpaw and I don't train together as much as before, since he's already getting into the more advanced moves." She looked aside at her brother with a small smile. "But he still tutors me a bit with the stuff I'm struggling on; it also takes some time and weight off of Sorreltail. I think she's actually pretty relieved of what he's doing."

"Dapplepaw! Darkpaw!"

The four cats all turned to look at Hollypaw, who had called the names. The black apprentice was with Lionpaw and Cinderpaw, beckoning her tail for the two other apprentices to come. Forgetting the small conversation immediately, Dapplepaw dashed over happily. Darkpaw followed behind at a slower pace, nodding a farewell to Leafpool and Leafsong, the warrior smiling after him.

The medicine cat faced her. "Are you ready to go back?"

"May I stay out here a bit longer? I promise I'll be careful."

Leafpool gave a huff. "I suppose it'll do no harm." She turned tail and went to do her own work in her den.

The sun was still high above the treetops overhead. Some apprentices, including both Darkpaw and Dapplepaw, were comparing battle moves, Lionpaw and Darkpaw bickering about who was better at fighting. Rosekit and Toadkit, littermates and the only kits in the Clan currently, were play-fighting in front of the nursery, their mother, Daisy, watching from the side while talking with Ferncloud. On one edge of the hollow, a group of four cats were sprawled out in the small amount of shade and having a conversation among themselves. Leafsong decided to walk over to hear what they were complaining about.

"Why in StarClan's name is it so hot?" Cloudtail was yowling. "I know it's greenleaf, but I don't remember it getting *this* warm."

Next to him, Birchfall snorted. "It doesn't help that you practically have the thickest fur in all the Clans."

"Hey," snapped Graystripe, "I greatly feel Cloudtail's pain."

Lastly, a small gray-and-white she-cat sighed and proclaimed, "I'm pretty sure we all share the same pain with this heat." She paused and turned her head. "RiverClan must be in paradise with their water. I'm surprised a fire hasn't started yet, at least not that we know of."

Leafsong spoke up from where she lay, the others seeming slightly surprised that she was there, too profound in their complaining. "Would you like me to get you four some water?"

The warriors glanced at each other while Birchfall gazed hopefully at her. "Really? Thanks, Leafsong."

Leafsong nodded her head in response. She began turning to exit the camp until Hazeltail stopped her.

"Will you be okay going alone?" she asked, worry in her eyes. "I mean, with your walking. Maybe you should have Leafpool go with you?"

The she-cat only needed a heartbeat to realize that what the young warrior said was true. She nodded her tilted head and replied, "Yeah, that would be best. I do not want to find out how well I could fight off a fox in this condition. Or worse, a badger." The pale-ginger cat headed off in the direction of the medicine den slowly, leaving Hazeltail feeling good about her suggestion.

The warrior climbed up to the den only to halt suddenly in front of the bramble screen as she heard voices in the small cavern.

"—is for soothing *wounds,* not cracked pads. What's getting into you, Jaypaw?"

The tom's gaze was practically visible to Leafsong, even though she

couldn't see him, when he muttered fiercely, "Nothing. It was just a simple mistake. I'll go fix it."

Leafsong barely moved aside before Jaypaw pushed through the screen and almost ran into her. She watched as he stomped over to the elders' den, carrying a couple of coltsfoot leaves with him. Her eyes narrowed a bit in thought, but she left it and entered the den.

Leafpool was sitting at the back, her amber eyes clouded in thought and worry. When Leafsong fully stepped in, the blur disintegrated and was replaced with a—seemingly forced—spark of a gentle joy. "Back so soon?" the medicine cat asked.

"Actually, I was wondering if you would go with me to get some soaked most for some of our Clanmates," she stated. She was not going to mention what little bit she heard take place before she came, even though she could easily guess what was bothering Jaypaw. "A bunch are complaining about the heat, and I guess are too tired to actually get up and walk down to the lake or something."

Leafpool purred in amusement at her last comment. "Sure, I'll come. They better pick last from the fresh-kill pile later on, though."

Leafsong gave a *mmrow* of laughter and followed the she-cat out.

The two she-cats trekked across ThunderClan's territory near the ShadowClan border and stream. They worked together to scrape most of the dry moss off the trees and shaped them into balls.

"I will continue getting the moss gathered," stated Leafpool. "You can start filling them up with water and just make a pile of them wherever."

Leafsong nodded and grabbed two already made balls in her mouth and another two gripped between her chest and chin. The medicine cat had said that if they were getting water for only four cats, they might as well bring plenty more for the others while they're out here.

The warrior walked carefully over to the stream and set the moss

balls beside it, keeping one in her mouth. As she bent down to have the cool liquid soak the moss, she noticed that the water was lower than usual and moving much slower than before. She lifted the now-drenched moss out of the stream and set it aside in the beginning of a new pile, the water seeping out of it and making a puddle on the grass.

Leafsong grabbed another moss ball in her mouth and, as she dipped it in the water, noticed some bubbles floating to the surface and popping. A wave of confusion and curiosity passed over her just before a dark body came rocketing out of the stream towards her. The force of its front paws ramming into her chest caused her to drop the moss ball and fall onto her back, the surprise-attacker landing with his paws pinning her down.

The cat's green eyes were friendly. "Hi, Leafsong! How are you doing?"

She struggled underneath him. Water was pouring down from his dampened fur onto her own pelt. "Apparently getting soaked from an almost-drowned squirrel," she joked mischievously. "Get off of me, Whitesnake!"

The tom purred as he hopped off. Leafsong stood up and shook out her pelt, trying her best to spray Whitesnake in the face.

"I thought you would've liked getting soaked," meowed Whitesnake, "being in this heat and all."

Leafsong had to admit, it did feel pretty nice with the sudden coolness in her skin. She glanced back to where Leafpool was still gathering moss balls. *Did she see that?* she wondered. Turning back to the tom, she requested, "Since you're here, you might as well help us getting moss balls wet to bring back for the Clan."

He snorted softly. "Why don't they come out here and get a drink themselves?"

"I don't know." Leafsong shrugged and shook her head in a shaming way. "They must all be lazy mice."

The currently-dark-gray-furred tom chuckled at this and went over to Leafpool to carry some more dry moss balls over. When he came back and began copying what Leafsong was doing, he commented, "I'm actually surprised to see you out here, and this far away from camp." He hurried on to not allow Leafsong to complain about how that was offensive. "I mean, with your walking."

The small burn of anger at the previous statement died immediately when he finished. Of course, why would she get angry with Whitesnake in the first place? *It's just because I feel weak and vulnerable when others talk about my...occurrence,* Leafsong told herself. *And plus, he's my friend—he would never hurt me, with words or claws.* "Leafpool said that I should be back to my normal walking tomorrow," the she-cat disclosed.

"Oh, thank StarClan," Whitesnake sighed gratefully. Leafsong tried her best to conceal her flinch she gave at his words and to force the old ire about her 'ancestors' from consuming her again. "I am sorry I didn't visit you in the den—I was getting quite busy."

The pale-furred warrior lifted her head from the stream and placed the dripping moss ball on the pile. "I am just automatically guessing that playing in the lake and streams took part in that."

His whiskers twitched. "Maybe..." he dragged out. Leafsong flicked his ear softly with the tip of her tail, causing him to feign a quiet yowl of pain as a kit would.

The two warriors kept on working in silence until Leafpool came trotting up looking like a giant moss ball with all of them she was carrying. She dropped them on the low pile of the other dry moss balls, grabbing one and filling it with water.

"Looks like you both filled a lot up," observed Leafpool. "We probably don't need to fill up every single one of these moss balls. I could probably take the dry ones back with me for later use."

"You could take them back now," suggested Whitesnake. "Leafsong and I will finish up with these couple last ones and take the wet moss balls to camp then."

Leafsong glanced at the tom. He seemed urgent when he insisted that the medicine cat left now.

Leafpool gazed anxiously at Leafsong. "Will you be fine without me?"

The she-cat nodded while Whitesnake answered shortly, "I'll make sure she doesn't fall or anything."

With still some reluctance in her eyes, the medicine cat gathered all the dry moss balls she could carry at one time, leaving two behind. She waddled through the forest towards the camp, splitting from the warriors.

Leafsong grabbed one of the two moss balls and began dipping it in the water.

"Leafsong, could you meet me at the Ancient Oak tonight?"

The she-cat dripped her moss ball into the stream and snapped her head to look at Whitesnake face to face at such a straight-forward question. *That explains why he wanted Leafpool to leave.* She was about to ask why when the tom already began answering her unvoiced word.

His green eyes were wide with sincerity and pleading. "I need to speak to you." He glanced around and on the other side of the border to scan for any eavesdropping cats and lowered his voice. "I know I could possibly do it right now, but I don't want anyone to overhear. Doing it in the daylight would be mouse-brained."

Leafsong looked up and down the gray tom, running her eyes down his single white stripe along his spine, and gazed into his emerald eyes. She could see that he desperately wanted to talk to her then, and his reason was as good as any. Relishing the look of great delight he gave her, Leafsong replied, "Fine. I will meet you at the Ancient Oak tonight."

Whitesnake's bright green eyes sparkled with happiness. He scrambled to carry the wet moss balls as he purred and mumbled through the mouthful, "Come on, let's go!"

Leafsong grabbed the rest and hurried to catch up, making Whitesnake slow down to match her careful pace if he wanted to walk side by side.

In their haste, the two warriors left two moss balls floating in the stream and one completely dry sitting on the grass.

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 5

Leafsong padded slowly on the forest floor toward the Ancient Oak. The very last of the sun's rays barely showed above the tips of ShadowClan's trees, stars appearing in the dark sky above. She was very eager to meet with Whitesnake tonight, but also a bit wary. Since their conversation by the stream earlier in the day, Leafsong has been wondering what he could possibly want to talk to her about that supposedly cannot be heard by anyone other than her.

The she-cat was nearing the Ancient Oak when she saw Whitesnake pacing beneath it. He noticed that she was there a heartbeat later and hurried to close the badger-length between them.

"There you are, Leafsong," he greeted. "I thought you had forgotten for a moment there."

"I am here, Whitesnake," mimicked Leafsong comically. "I did not forget about you wanting to meet me here." She gazed humorously into the tom's eyes, but the mood soon faded away as she realized that there was no laughter brightening them. Instead, a great seriousness overtook the normal keen, mischievous green orbs. "What's the matter?" she asked softly.

Whitesnake looked at her for a moment before turning toward the lake shore and simply meowed back, "Come with me."

Making paw prints in the sand as she did, Leafsong trailed after the gray tom toward the lake. The warrior's shoulders seemed to be slumping, as if a heavy weight was atop of them. He sat a few paces away from the water. Leafsong, glaring at the star-spangled lake surface, settled down another pace or two from it beside Whitesnake. Anger was silently growing inside of her about her tensions with StarClan, but she tried her best to push it back down and save it for later. *Right now is about Whitesnake's problem,* the she-cat told herself with a shake of her head.

The air buzzed in the quiet night when Whitesnake remained mute and only stared out across the lake. With her gaze lingering on the warrior to keep herself from looking directly at the lake, Leafsong opened her mouth and gently asked, "What did you want to tell me?" Her voice was like a mild breeze flowing through fur.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something..." he corrected. Leafsong pricked her ears both in shock and to hear what he had to ask. "I know this is a *completely* random question for anyone," he chuckled unsteadily. The tom took a deep breath and swiveled his head around to look at Leafsong in the eye. Leafsong gazed back, the tom's magnificently twinkling eyes mixed with both sadness and hope. His mouth opened to ask his question. "Do you know who my parents are?"

Time seemed to stop at the question. *Do you know who my parents are?* it repeated in her head. *Do I know who your parents are?* she rephrased. *I know who your mother is....* She flinched with the memory:

A desperate mother, mourning for her kits, who she had to exile herself from their own Clan. A lost lover, who wailed about her own mate leaving her to take care of their kits and her problems on her own. And a vengeful warrior, who only wanted to get revenge on the Clans for what pain they brought to her life. The she-cat disappeared behind the hill in what once was her Clan's territory, where she grew up in and carried out Clan duties, loyal to her first family, eventually abandoning her like her mate. Her sadness made her eyes even bluer as she left her only home—

Because I *told her to.*

I'm the reason why Whitesnake, and even Frostdrop and Shiningice have no mother.

Leafsong fought to keep herself from trembling. *I have to tell him,* she insisted. *He deserves to know about at least* one *of his parents... and what happened to her.*

Knowing that she would greatly want to know who her parents were if she did not, Leafsong tried to break free from the statue-like

stillness she felt like from the shock, this time being her turn to take a deep breath. "Yes," she disclosed, trying her best to keep calmness in her voice, though she knew that it was clearly quavering like a kit soaked to the bone in the middle of leaf-bare. "I" –she swallowed nervously— "I know who your mother is."

The giant surge of happiness and hope rushing into Leafsong was as painful as a deep wound scored across her belly. Whitesnake's eyes were blazing so brightly in the starlight that they seemed like emerald fires. "You *do?"* the tom mewed ecstatically. "Who is she? What's her name? What Clan is she from?"

Leafsong flattened her ears from the questions being hurled at her, but the only thing that Whitesnake seemed to be focused on are the answers. "Her name is Swiftclaw." A memory flashed across her vision for one heartbeat disappearing again. "She is from WindClan."

The thrilled gray tom sucked in a breath out of even more excitement. With his fur rippling in great joy, he bounded a few large strides toward WindClan territory, crying out, "WindClan! I can go see her now!" He glanced back at Leafsong, delight crackling in his eyes still. "Let's go, Leafsong!"

"No," Leafsong meowed mildly, trying to sound a little demanding, "you can't go see your mother."

Whitesnake snorted in realization of his own mistake. "Oh, of course I can't! What would they think, a cat in a rival Clan just visiting their camp to see kin? How could I be *that* mouse brained? I'll just wait by the border until a patrol—"

"No, Whitesnake," interrupted Leafsong more fiercely this time, "you *really* can't go see your mother."

His eyes raked her own, and Leafsong saw his heart break with grief in their now melancholy depths. "You mean," his voice was lowered to a whisper now, all signs of triumph vanished, "she *died?"*

Leafsong took a step back from the question. "No, no! She—"

"Then what happened to her?" the tom wailed desperately. "Where is she?"

"She... I...." Leafsong sputtered for words, but she knew she had to tell him. The she-cat took another deep breath, preparing for Whitesnake's reaction. "I—I made her leave the Clans, Whitesnake. I had to...."

"What?" breathed the tom. His eyes grew wide with shock and disbelief. "You—you mean she's not in the... Clans anymore?" His gray fur began to bristle. "You drove her out? *Why?"*

Leafsong took a step back, her tail down and brushing against her hind leg in uneasiness. "I *had* to, Whitesnake," she insisted. "She was going to kill me and probably do more to the Clans... She was blinded by vengeance and sadness!"

Although she told the warrior twice now that it was a necessity to tell his mother to leave the territories, Leafsong was still doubtful that the action she chose was the correct one.

She just needed help, the she-cat thought with a pang within her. *All Swiftclaw wanted was to live a happy life with her mate and kits... but now that's all taken away from her. And half of it was because of me.*

Whitesnake's eyes burned into hers and he shook his head slightly. He said nothing as he turned toward the forest. Half-way up the lakeshore, he paused to look back at her with his searing gaze and growled somberly, "Thanks for telling me who my mother is." He faced the forest again and raced into it, being swallowed by the darkness.

The sand-colored she-cat bounded a few steps toward where he left, calling his name, though she did not know what she wanted to say to him now. Leafsong sighed as her gaze lingered on the spot he disappeared. "Did I really just lose a friend like that?" she asked no one in particular in a quiet voice.

She swiveled her head around to look at the star-filled lake. Flattening her ears and narrowing her eyes in hatred and mistrust, the warrior glared up at the night sky. *No thanks to you,* she hissed

in her head, *the ones who had told me several times that they would be by my side each heartbeat.* As she looked up in disgust, Leafsong noticed that dark clouds had been forming above WindClan territory and were steadily drifting over the lake. *I guess that's one good thing.*

Her eyes jolted away from the sky and she started padding up the pebbly shore toward the Ancient Oak. She craned her head to look at the branches hovering sturdily above. Instead of climbing up the trunk, Leafsong decided to curl up between two of the large roots jutting out of the dirt.

I'm sure Leafpool won't mind if I sleep out here for another night, thought the she-cat. She yawning and rested her tail-tip on her muzzle. *Plus, I'm not really in the mood to see Whitesnake at the moment, and I am most certain that Whitesnake doesn't want to see me, either.*

Leafsong shuffled to get more comfortable and then closed her eyes in the beginnings of a restless sleep.

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A disembodied voice spoke in Leafsong's head as if it were her own thought: *You will come here again within the next few days to continue your training. I will be waiting.*

As if it were a signal, the warrior blinked open her eyes and gaped her jaws in a huge yawn. After arching her back in a long stretch, Leafsong padded down the shore to the lake. The sandy pebbles beneath her paws were already warm, despite it being just past dawn. She bent down to lap at the cooler water only to snap her head upward as she realized now that the sky was completely covered with dark, gray clouds. A flit of joy bounced up in her chest.

Are we finally going to get rain? she thought hopefully.

That happy relief soon transferred into angry regret at the remembrance of her and Whitesnake's conversation last night. She scraped her paw across the pebbles and then began stomping up to

the forest.

While her paws aimlessly took her through the woods, her mind whirled with all her thoughts about the talk. *Does Whitesnake really want to meet his mother that badly? Well, or course he does! He hasn't been with her since late kithood. Is he going to tell his sisters? Will Shiningice and Frostdrop start to hate me, too? I wonder if Whitesnake and I will ever be friends again.... Will he ever forgive me?*

After a long time of padding under the trees, lost in her own thoughts and many questions, Leafsong caught a whiff of an odor that was very different from the usual forest scents of trees, leaves, and the occasional prey. Forcing herself to stop her thinking for right now, she halted in her footsteps and took in deep breaths to identify the smell better. While she did this, the pale-ginger she-cat realized her paws had led her in sight of the ShadowClan border, when she thought she was going back to the ThunderClan camp in the center of the territory.

Just when the warrior was going to not worry about it and get back to her Clan, her ears barely picked up the sound of a crackling noise, and a sudden growing of heat greater than it had been all greenleaf nipped at Leafsong's tail-tip and haunches. Slowly, with her fur rising in the beginnings of a bristle, she turned her head to look behind her.

Leafsong's eyes grew wide while her ears flattened against her head at the terrorizing sight of the several tail-length tail and wide fire quickly spreading toward her, the flames greedily devouring the dry plants. Not having time to yowl out the frightened caterwaul that burbled in her chest, Leafsong fled in a random direction due to her panic. But as she rounded the trunk of an alder tree, the scared warrior skidded to a halt as she almost ran straight in to another set of the smoldering embers. She ran in a different direction in a second attempt to escape, but once again encountered more fire.

Leafsong began to repeat the process of trying to run and meeting more burning flames, each time increasing her anxiety. Soon, the only things in her vision were the flames threatening to burn her and the dark, black smoke covering the leaves and sky above her, causing her to cough as she breathed it in.

I'm trapped! she realized with dread.

Eventually, the coughing accelerated to the point where Leafsong had to stop trying to flee the burning forest as the hacking took over. With her flame-reflecting eyes burning in the intense heat, the she-cat froze in one space as her body shuddered with the force of the coughing. Her exhausted legs buckled beneath her. Digging her claws into the ground and continuing on coughing, Leafsong tried pushing herself up, but her up, but even that was too much for her and made her topple over onto her flank.

The suffering warrior stared at the blazing fire surrounding her. The smoke continued on pouring out of the flicking flames, now filling the forest floor thick enough so that Leafsong could hardly see anything a fox-length away. Her vision had begun to dim and darkness seeped at the edges. Her coughing had settled down to sounding every now and again, but her lungs were still full of the dreadful smoke, and her eyes were watering. The roar of the fire pounded in her ears, and its heat scorched her fur.

As she lay still on the ground, Leafsong concluded, *This is it. This is how the Chosen Warrior is going to die. Is my work here done? Did that precious StarClan plan this all along, and why they gave up on me?*

Then a heartbeat later, Leafsong saw a darker shadow, in the form of a cat, push through the smoke and between the fires towards her.

"White—snake...?" the weak she-cat croaked inaudibly with the sound of crackling and branches breaking loudly.

But instead of the gray tom with a white stripe running down his spine coming to her, Leafsong saw an anonymous brown cat with a blank underbelly. As the strange newcomer bent down to grab her scruff, Leafsong's vision went blank with blackness, with the last feeble thought of: *Who are you?*

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 6

The soft pattering of the cool rain gently fell against Leafsong's soaked flank. Wet grass pricked at her other side where she lied. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and her nose was filled with the scent of smoke. Her breath caught in her throat and a coughing fit racked her body.

"Here, lick at this," a soft, quiet voice told her. A heartbeat later, a damp moss ball was pushed up against her muzzle.

Instead of obeying the cat, Leafsong opened her eyes to see the brown-and-black tom standing a tail-length away. He darted away quickly, but soon returned, carrying a bunch of purple-blue berries connected to a spikey twig. He set it down and tore one of the berries off, placing it next to the moss ball.

"Eat this, too," he ordered. "It's a juniper berry; it will help with your breathing."

This time, Leafsong did what he said, though warily. She was painfully conscious of the tom's brilliant green gaze focusing on her greatly. She swallowed the fair-tasting berry and lapped at the moss, relishing the cool moisture drenching her dry mouth.

"How do you feel?" came his serene voice again.

Leafsong stopped her drinking and looked directly up at the tom for the first time. Instead of answering his question, her hackles began to rise in suspicion. "Who are you?" she interrogated him. Suddenly, she realized that she was not in a part of the forest she recognized and she could not smell any ThunderClan scent. "Where am I? Why are you helping me?"

In spite of her aggressive behavior, the tom still looked at her with calmness. His answers flowed out of his mouth smoothly and with precise meaning. "Other cats usually just call me Brave. Right now,

you're in the middle of a forest." He angled his ears toward behind Leafsong. "A stream is over there, a good source of water. I am helping you because, well, that's what I do." He shrugged. "I see cats in need, so I help them." The tom paused for a heartbeat before explaining more, "I saw the smoke rising from the forest more towards the big lake that's down there and went to check it out, to see if anyone was caught in it. Sure enough," he concluded, "I saw you practically unconscious, lying in the middle of all that fire, and took you here. I was quite surprised to learn that you were still breathing, even if it was just a smattering."

All Leafsong could do was stare up at the brown-and-black tom, thoroughly impressed at his replies. But she had no time to say anything before Brave spoke again.

"Get some more rest; those juniper berries seem to be working already. You should sleep without disturbing yourself now."

The she-cat curled up with her tail resting on her nose and did as he said, closing her eyes and falling asleep within three heartbeats.

*****

When Leafsong woke up again, the rain had stopped, and the clouds above were beginning to dissipate, showing burning stars between the gaps. The air was finally cool after all the days in the hot greenleaf. The forest surrounding the warrior was still and quiet, the faint dripping of a water droplet the only occasionally audible noise.

"Ah, you are away again," the gentle meow pierced the silence.

Leafsong turned her head toward the source of the voice and saw Brave kneeling with his paws tucked beneath his a few tail-lengths away. He was gazing up at the sky with a great interest shining in his green eyes. A soft breeze lightly ruffled his brown fur.

The she-cat stared over at him, scanning his body and position. *He almost looks like a medicine cat,* she thought, *with him stargazing like that.*

And then realization surged into her.

Leafsong pushed herself to her paws, barely managing to stand upright. "I need to get back to my Clan!" she pleaded. "They all must be wondering where I am and are worried about me." The warrior began to turn toward the direction of the lake to go back home. "Thank you so much for helping me, but I must—"

Before she could take more than one step forward, she got cut off from the bout of coughing, her legs giving way to her weight and buckling beneath her. Brave had already been rushing to her in the middle of her small speech and was beside her heartbeats before she fell. The tom had shot his shoulder underneath hers, catching her before she hit the ground.

"No, you cannot leave yet!" he told her as he slowly laid her on the ground again. "As you just experience, you are too weak to move much, and all that smoke you breathed in from the fire is still irritating your chest."

Leafsong looked upward to glare into his calm eyes with frustration and desperation. "But my Clanmates *need* me!" She wailed like a kit. "And I need them! They're my family."

But Brave was sympathetically shaking his head. "I am sorry, but like I already said, you still need healing. Hopefully you will be well enough to go back to your... *Clanmates* within two days or so."

Leafsong badly wanted to argue more to go back sooner, but she painfully realized she couldn't convince the tom. *My Clanmates didn't have me for a whole moon once,* she reminded herself for comfort. *They shouldn't be* that *worried since I'll be gone only a few days.*

"So, you have been talking about this... *Clan* just now," Brave started up a new discussion, lying down beside Leafsong. "Tell me about it. First off, what *is* a Clan?"

Leafsong stared in disbelief at him. "You mean to tell me that you've been living here, right outside the territories, and have never heard of the Clans?"

The brown-and –black tom blinked in bewilderment. "There is more than one Clan? Then tell me about all of them!" he mewed excitedly. Then he corrected Leafsong with a side glance, "And I actually do not really live anywhere, or have a place to call home. I usually stay in one place for about a moon and then move on to the next area." He nodded to Leafsong, allowing her to continue her explanation.
"Well, there are four different Clans living around the lake," the pale ginger she-cat began. "They each have their own likings and attributes. ThunderClan, the Clan that I belong to, lives in this forest closer to the lake. We're known for our loyalty and our generosity of helping others.

"ShadowClan is one of the Clans that border ThunderClan, and lives in the pine forest towards that way." She nodded to where ShadowClan's territory would be. "I'd say the other Clans don't like them that much. They're wily and too proud of themselves, and some of their cats are not to be easily trusted; I personally don't have a problem with them.

"On the other side of ThunderClan are the hills, where WindClan is. They can get a bit snappy at times, but it's mostly just to protect their territory or feed their Clanmates.

"And then on the other side of the lake, opposite of ThunderClan, is RiverClan. The other Clans find it strange that they enjoy getting their paws wet and eating fish all day, but they are pretty faithful to each other and do whatever they can for their Clan."

When Leafsong finished, Brave was gazing at her with the same great interest he had when he was looking up at the sky and stars. "Wow," he breathed with exhilaration, "I never knew cats could be so *different*... but yet, the *same."*

Leafsong nodded vigorously. "That's how the Clans are supposed to be; each Clan is different, but how we live under StarClan and the warrior code, we are the same," she added on.

A brand new curiosity lit brightly in the tom's green, mystic orbs, much more transcendent than the other two times. "StarClan," he echoed, transfixed. "That sounds so majestic and peaceful. What is

StarClan?"

The familiar feeling of rage and despair gradually filled the hollow within Leafsong at the mention of her ancestors. Her face relaxed with a sadder expression, and she looked away from Brave. After a couple heartbeats she took a deep breath and choked out, "StarClan are the ancestors of the Clans, where cats go when they die. They sometimes give cats prophecies, and are supposed to be with us all the time and protect us." She was aware of the bitterness that crept into the last part.

"Err... are you all right?"

Leafsong whipped her head back towards Brave. She saw that he was looking down at her paws, so she followed his gaze. Surprise jolted her when she saw that her claws had unsheathed and dug into the moist dirt. She looked back up at Brave with an emotionless expression.

"I never asked for your name yet, did I?"

The she-cat quickly retracted her claws and answered, "My name is Leafsong, and I am a warrior of ThunderClan."

"Leafsong," repeated Brave, saying the name for the first time. "Sounds like a very pleasant name. Why did you get like that when you told me about your ancestors, Leafsong?" He asked the question slowly and gently, as if taking caution.

Her shoulders sagged and she averted her eyes from Brave. "It's just..." she turned away again, "nothing."

"Are you angry at StarClan?" The question made Leafsong's ears flatten against her head.

"I might be..." she mumbled.

"Why might you be angry at your ancestors?" When Leafsong did not respond, he continued. "I noticed that when you told me that they are supposed to be with you all the time and protect you that you had a sort of sourness to your tone. Do you feel that StarClan has deserted you to be on your own?"

Leafsong's head instantly snapped around to stare at Brave with wide eyes, her jaws gaping slightly in awe. "Yes," she breathed, barely disturbing the still night with her words, "that's exactly how a feel. How did you...?"

Brave's tail-tip flicked up once, either with satisfaction or annoyance, the she-cat did not know. "By your words, reactions, and tone of voice was how I knew," he replied shrewdly. "You were fine when telling me about ThunderClan, ShadowClan, WindClan, and RiverClan, being all happy and excited to inform me about them, but once I asked you about StarClan, your attitude and emotions changed quite rapidly."

Flattening her ears in shame, Leafsong muttered, "I guess it is pretty obvious... but I don't think any of my Clanmates noticed yet."

As she finished, another round of coughing burst from her chest. Almost immediately, Brave pushed the wet moss ball from earlier and another juniper berry in front of her nose. Without having him tell her what to do, Leafsong ate the berry and lapped at the moss.

"Would you like any poppy seeds to help you sleep?" the brown-and-black tom asked politely.

Leafsong shook her head. "No, I think I'll be fine for the rest of the night."

The tom nodded in acceptance and offered his shoulder to Leafsong. She got up and, leaning on him, was guided over to a hollowed out fallen tree trunk. He led her into it and rested her on a premade nest of ferns. Leafsong gladly curled up in it and closed her eyes. She was faintly aware of Brave's back next to hers as he lay down beside her.

The last of their conversation remained fresh in her mind as Leafsong slowly drifted to sleep, the thought of having someone possibly understand her feelings making her sleep undisturbed.

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Chapter 7

Leafsong's eyes opened up to see sunshine pouring into the two entrances on either side of the hollowed-out tree trunk. She looked around for Brave, but saw no sign of him. Slowly, the she-cat rose to her paws and carefully crawled out of the trunk.

She blinked as the sun's rays glinted in her eyes. The air was much cooler since the rain yesterday, and the sunlight warmed her pelt as she slunk out into the open and scanned the forest around her for the tom. After only a heartbeat of searching, Leafsong heard pawsteps behind her and spun around.

"Good morning," Brave mumbled around a mouthful of fur from a plump shrew he carried. "Sleep well?"

The ThunderClan warrior took one or two paces forward to meet him. "Well enough," she replied with a dip of her head. "Better than before."

While she spoke, Brave had placed the fresh-kill down in front of her paws. He flicked his tail at it and meowed, "Eat. You need to keep you strength and energy up in order to heal quickly and properly."

Leafsong crouched down and opened her mouth to take a big bite, but stopped herself and looked up at the tom. "Are you going to eat?"

He nodded. "I will find something for me later."

"No, no!" Leafsong pushed the shrew closer to Brave. "Share it with me. You're already working so hard to take care of me."

With barely a heartbeat of hesitation, the brown-and-black tom accepted her offer and crouched down next to her. Leafsong nodded her head toward the fresh-kill to silently tell Brave that she's

allowing him to take the first bite. He reached his neck forward and took a big chunk of meat from the shrew's flank. Leafsong followed after him and tore a piece of flesh from its haunch, the juicy flavors dancing on her tongue.

"Is this what Clan cats do?" Brave asked when he swallowed. "Share prey with each other?"

"Yes," the she-cat nodded, gulping down her mouthful. "Patrols are sent out every day to catch prey for their Clan and stock up the fresh-kill pile. Elders and queens and their kits always eat first—it's part of the warrior code."

"I see. So, you mentioned warriors, elders, and queens," the tom mused. "What other little groups are within a Clan?"

Leafsong took another quick bite and swallowed it. "Sometimes, warriors are given a younger cat to train in hunting and fighting and teach them about the Clans. Those younger cats are called apprentices, who are able to get a mentor once they reach six moons old. And of course we have a leader," she went on. Brave took another bite from the shrew. "Our leaders are given the gift of nine lives from StarClan to assist them along their leadership, and the second half of their name changes to 'star'. The deputy is second-in-command and helps with the leader with Clan business. Deputies are supposed to become the new Clan leader after the previous leader dies." She paused to get a small morsel and give Brave a chance to comment before she went on.

"I did not think that Clans were so... *organized!"* remarked the tom, impressed.

Leafsong nodded. "We all have our own part to do in the Clan—even kits. They can easily lighten up the Clan with their joyful little mewling! But I'd have to say that the most important cat in the Clan, probably right up to the leader, would have to be the medicine cat."

At her words, the other cat's green eyes glittered hungrily at her, now ignoring the dead, half-eaten shrew lying limply at his paws.

"The medicine cat in each Clan," she continued, "has the closest connection to StarClan than any other cat. They share tongues with them every half-moon when they visit the Moonpool and are given prophecies and warnings for the Clan. Medicine cats also work with what they're names for—medicine. They heal other's injuries and take care of sickness, and of course watch over queens and newly birthed kits. They are most likely why the Clans have survived for so long."

Brave blinked at her and then looked at the tree trunk they were crouching by. "You mean they know all about herbs and their healing properties?" Leafsong assumed that he was thinking about his own stock of herbs.

"Exactly." She nodded once in agreement. "You know," the warrior went on slowly, "you'd make a good Clan cat."

At the sight of Brave's surprised expression, she explained, "You know plenty about herbs and healing. Look at you; you're healing and taking care of me!" She flicked her tail-tip at the carcass of the shrew. "You hunted for me, and were originally going to have me eat before you. And I saw how interested in the sky and stars you were, even StarClan. I think you'd fit in just fine."

A long silence stretched out between the two as they stared at each other.

Eventually, Brave interrupted the quietness with his usual soft voice. "Are you asking me to join your Clan?"

Leafsong was slightly shocked at the question, but slowly came to realize that that was exactly what she was doing. *I didn't even notice myself that I wanted him to join,* she thought.

"Maybe," she shrugged. "If you want to, that is."

Brave's gaze became unfocused as his mind slipped into thought, thinking up all the possibilities there would be if he did join. "Perhaps," he meowed distantly. "I will think about it."

Satisfied, the she-cat tore off the last scrap of meat on the shrew

and carefully pushed herself to her paws. She was happy to find that she could at least stand up firmly now.

"Let us practice your walking," Brave spoke her thoughts. "If it goes well, maybe you could go back to your Clanmates tomorrow."

Leafsong could tell that she wasn't the only one bursting with excitement; as Brave pressed up against her to keep her steady when she placed one paw in front of the other, she could feel anticipation flowing beneath his pelt and see his whiskers quivering with eagerness.

I guess he already made up his mind, thought Leafsong, amused.

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She curled up in her nest in the hollowed-out tree trunk, listening to the occasional hoot of an owl in the night. For the rest of the day, Brave had been helping her restore her walking patterns. Already, Leafsong felt more in control with her balance and legs, and was surprised at how quickly she did so with her previous ordeal of her fainting. Brave had been a very benign and patient cat to her since the fire only two days ago, and she was eager to go back to her Clan, possibly having the quiet tom join with her. The thought settled itself in her mind as the nighttime noises faded away and darkness overwhelmed her.

A swish of some ferns disrupted Leafsong's rest. She tried to ignore it and go back to sleep, but then the soft scuffling of paws on the forest floor became louder and nearer to her.

With an annoyed lash of her tail, the pale ginger she-cat snapped open her eyes and admonished, "Brave, can you—"

She cut herself off and rolled into a crouched position as she gazed at the cat and the surrounding area in front of her. The towering trees pierced through the dull light as they soared upward.

"Get *away* from me, Owlheart!" she hissed fiercely at the brown-and-white she-cat. Nervousness began prickling in her pelt, but she forced her fur flat to deceive her Dark Forest mentor. "Why did you

bring me here? I want nothing to do with you!" She glared menacingly at Owlheart, the remembrance that she played a part in Swiftclaw's attempt on the Chosen Warrior's life filling her mind.

Through her glare and growling, Owlheart still stood calmly, and irritatingly had an amused glint in her amber eyes. "Calm down, *apprentice,"* she sneered. "You'll be glad to hear this news." She began sauntering aimlessly around the area.

"What news?" Leafsong asked, irritated when she didn't speak for a moment.

She stopped in her tracks and swiped an intimidating gaze over her. "I thought you wanted nothing to do with me?" she countered, making her voice high-pitched and eyes wide to feign innocence.

Leafsong gave another growl. She hated Owlheart. Why did she ever allow herself to be pulled into this? "Just tell me the fox-hearted news!"

The Dark Forest she-cat remained silent for a few more long moments until Leafsong thought she would burst. Eventually, she answered, "You're lucky; this is the last time we're going to see each other in a while. I am giving you over to another cat to mentor."

Leafsong stared wide-eyed at her. *"What?"* she gaped.

"I have taken up another task," Owlheart continued. "I trust that your new mentor will do well with you."

"But I don't want a mentor!" Leafsong screeched. "I don't want to be here in the Dark Forest anymore!"

Owlheart slowly began padding around the pale-ginger she-cat, eerily like fog. The prickling in Leafsong's pelt spread all over, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't prevent her fur from sticking up. "If my sources are correct, I have learned that you are having a bit of a feud with StarClan right now, is that correct?"

"Sources?" Leafsong echoed after a few heartbeats. "What sources?" Her heart was fluttering like a bird trapped in her chest.

"I said, *is that correct?"* Owlheart disregarded her questioning and, to urge her more, slashed Leafsong's flank once.

Leafsong flinched and gasped at the sudden pain. "Correct," she answered forcefully.

"And I assume you absolutely *hate* the feeling of abandonment, correct?"

This time, the Dark Forest she-cat did not give her a chance to reply before she slashed her other flank once, forcing Leafsong to fall to her knees with the overwhelming throbbing pain.

"Correct," Leafsong rasped between clenched teeth.

Owlheart then halted in front of her and bent down to put her face directly in front of the warrior's. She chimed in a sweet voice, though her words were nothing close to sweet. "The Dark Forest *never* abandons any who are a part of it. You don't have to worry about feeling abandoned and forgotten by us. We are a part of you, and you are a part of us." She paused to scratch Leafsong's muzzle and then hissed, "Consider yourself lucky, Leafsong."

The sound of her name from the wicked she-cat sent a great shiver down her spine.

As Owlheart stepped away from her, the ThunderClan warrior remained crouched over, breathing hard and trying to ignore the massive pain all over her body.

"Your new mentor should be here any moment now," Owlheart informed her, seeming to act like nothing had happened at all. Without any farewell, she disappeared into the dark undergrowth elsewhere.

A moment later, Leafsong heard a heavy huff and twisted her head to look at the newcomer. A large, muscular white tom gazed back at her with a calm but strict amber eye. His ears and chest were silver, along with his gently flicking tail-tip. But what Leafsong found the most interesting—and certainly most disturbing—was that a long scar cut down from his ear and directly across his right eye; there

was no doubt that the eye was no longer in use.

"Hmph. You must be the legendary Leafsong I've been hearing all about." The tom's voce was a low growl, and the depth in it seemed to rattle every hanging leaf in the area. His single eye scanned across her body and situation. "Doesn't seem very impressive to me," he snorted.

She couldn't help being more fearful than embarrassed. *This place is a* nightmare. *Why did I ever enjoy going here?*

Because I didn't realize how bad it actually is.

"Squirrel got your tongue?" the tom mocked. "Get up. We will start training right away. Nightblaze, help this she-cat get up."

"Yes, Wolfscar."

For the first time, Leafsong noticed that there was another tom who padded from behind the white tom, Wolfscar, toward her. He was black with dark, midnight blue eyes. Dark ginger fur covered his paws, along with a single orange splash on his right shoulder.

"Greetings," he welcomed as he helped her up. "My name is Nightblaze. You must be Wolfscar's newest apprentice. It's an honor to train with you."

A confused look showed on Leafsong's face. "Wait," she meowed, glancing back and forth between the two toms, "I'm training with you, too?"

"Ah, I forgot to tell you," spoke Wolfscar with little emphasis in his words, "I have another apprentice alongside you, it being Nightblaze here. You two will be doing most of your training together now."

Leafsong scanned her eyes over Nightblaze's body. He was decently large, but not as big as Wolfscar. The challenge glittering in his eyes said that he fought well, and rarely showed mercy in battle. She could tell that the black tom was doing the same to her, and she suddenly felt very self-conscious about her lean, she-cat body and her fresh wounds she got from Owlheart. Quickly, she wiped the

feeling from her mind as she remembered that she was the Chosen Warrior, and has fought off multiple cats with her alone.

"We'll just start out with you two fighting each other," Wolfscar casually meowed. He added with a nod at Leafsong, "I'd like to see where your skill level is at."

"What?" Leafsong protested. "I'm already hurt! I can't fight!"

Wolfscar gave her a menacing glare from his one eye. He growled deeply, "If I say you fight, you fight. Understood?"

She applied the lesson she learned with Owlheart just a few moments ago and nodded in agreement to avoid anymore unwanted injuries.

"Good," he responded. He then flicked his tail.

A heartbeat later Nightblaze was on top of her, pinning her down while she struggled on her back. The pain in her sides renewed and she held back a yelp. She was going to argue about Wolfscar not announcing to begin the scrimmage, but soon realized that the tail flick their mentor gave was the signal to start.

Nightblaze's claws pricked her chest as they—gently—pierced her skin. She flailed her back paws around, trying to pull them up under his belly to push him off, but failing to do so. Eventually, Leafsong switched plans and moved one of her back paws toward Nightblaze's own and shoved it hard. As he lost his balance, Leafsong swiftly slithered out under his loosened grasp before Nightblaze toppled over onto his side, trying her best to ignore the pain.

She quickly doubled back to lay some swipes on her fallen opponent, though was only able to land one hit on Nightblaze's ear as he almost instantly got right back up. He raised his paw, claws out, and brought it down to slice Leafsong's cheek, but the she-cat was faster and managed to knock the oncoming paw away and countering it with her own blow to his muzzle. The black tom staggered backwards a footstep or two and shook his head to recover from the stinging. While he was preoccupied for a

heartbeat, Leafsong launched herself at him, paws reaching out in front. She felt the satisfying feeling of taking weight with her as she forced Nightblaze onto the ground and pinned him. She jolted her neck forward to clamp onto his shoulder and slightly dug her teeth in. Nightblaze's hisses filled her ears.

"Good."

Wolfscar's one-word order was enough to know that the short fight was over. Leafsong pulled back from Nightblaze's shoulder and hopped off of him. He pushed himself up and shook out his fur.

"Good," the big white-and-silver tom rumbled with his deep voice again. "That will do for now. You are dismissed."

Leafsong was shocked at what he said. "Wait," she intervened, "we're already done? But I just got here...." Her pelt prickled as her Dark Forest mentor's one eye gazed eerily calmly at her. She immediately regretted saying anything as she was already covered with her own blood and hurting from Owlheart's slashes.

"I know," he replied with a hint of annoyance. "I only needed to see your skill level tonight. We will do more and work much harder the next time you come here." With that, he spun around and stalked off into the woods, leaving Leafsong with Nightblaze. After letting out a sigh of relief that her careless words didn't earn her another fight, she turned her head to look at her fellow apprentice, a slightly bewildered expression plastered on her face.

The black tom shrugged and snorted, "He did the same to me when I first became his apprentice. But he's not lying that you will do much more the next time you come, I'll assure you of that." His eyes clouded with memory but went away so quickly that Leafsong wasn't sure if she only imagined it or not.

"But don't worry," he went on. Leafsong walked beside him as they padded through the forest. "You seem pretty capable of handling what he teaches you. You fought well tonight, considering you already had fresh wounds."

She simply replied, "Thanks." Leafsong resisted the urge to lick her

chest in embarrassment. Instead, a thought popped into her head. "You fought well, too, but it seemed like you were... going easy on me, or something." She glanced aside at him.

A moment of silence passed. "Maybe I was," came his smooth voice, his eyes glistening with little mischief, "maybe I wasn't. Like I said before, you already had fresh wounds. And plus, it's your first time with Wolfscar and me; why should you get severe wounds already?"

Leafsong did not respond, but felt respect towards the tom's wise words and thoughts. She appreciated that he followed them. "I need to get going now," she meowed, not knowing what else to say. "I'll see you whenever." She stopped walking and curled up in a sleeping position.

"What are you doing?" Nightblaze's question interrupted her.

She looked up at him and saw confusion gazing back at her. "I'm going back to the waking world," she explained. "That's where I live."

"Oh," the tom replied, half-heartedly, "you don't live here in the Dark Forest."

The air around the two cats bubbled with awkwardness. Leafsong ineptly meowed, "No, I live in ThunderClan..."

A long moment of no talking stretched out between the two. Leafsong's pelt was itching crazily as if ants were crawling around on her skin. Eventually, Nightblaze simply meowed, "Bye," and padded elsewhere in the thick forest. She couldn't help but hear a faint note almost like sadness in the word, but she was glad to curl up again, close her eyes, and leave the awkward situation behind as the Dark Forest faded around her and brought her to blackness.

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 8

"Good morning!"

Leafsong yanked open her eyes and saw Brave standing over her with his forest green eyes dazzling with joy.

"Do you think you are well enough to go hunting?" he asked hopefully.

"I'll try." Quickly, she groomed her bedraggled fur, and as she did, she realized that her wounds from the Dark Forest weren't there; she only had a slight throb, but no slash or blood. *Weird,* she thought, confused but thankful at the same time. She shook it off and followed the brown-and-black tom out of the tree trunk.

The sun was steadily climbing out from the hills in WindClan territory, its bright rays finding their way to shine through the leaves and branches. White, fluffy clouds speckled the light blue sky, and birdsong filled the calm and peaceful forest. Leafsong took a deep breath and brought in the scent of wildflower and prey.

"It's *beautiful* out here!" exclaimed Leafsong.

"A perfect day to go back to your home, is it not?"

The pale-ginger she-cat snapped her head away from the vivid image and stared directly at the tom. "You mean," she began slowly, "you're allowing me to go back to my Clan now?"

Brave nodded, though Leafsong couldn't help notice a mixture of nervousness and excitement swimming in his eyes. But before she could say anything more, he meowed, "I still want us to hunt first, though. You know, so you are not starving when you see your Clanmates again."

Dipping her head in agreement, Leafsong replied, "Of course!" and

then dashed off into the woods, leaving Brave to scamper after her.

"Slow down!" Brave's whispered shout reached her ears. "You are going to scare all the prey away with your loud stomping, and make me scare them by trying to tell you to stop!"

Leafsong obeyed and slowed down to a walk.

"I had thought Clan cats would know to be *quiet* while hunting," he muttered when he caught up to her; however, his eyes were filled with amusement.

"Sorry," the she-cat apologized, "but I'm just glad that I get to go back. I hope the fire didn't reach the camp..." She gasped at the sudden realization.

But Brave shook his head. "It began raining a while after I got you," he assured. "The fire didn't spread toward the hills. It only stayed in that one area, and a little in the pine forest."

Though she felt bad for ShadowClan, Leafsong relaxed at the statement, and she smiled at the tom gratefully.

The rustling of a holly bush caused the conversation to come to an end. Leafsong looked at her hunting partner expectantly, but he took a few paces back and flicked his tail at her as a signal for her to catch the prey alone. Leafsong assumed that he wanted to see if she was well enough to hunt—either that, or just to see how well her hunting skills were, period.

I'll show him what he wants, then, she challenged in her mind.

Getting into the hunter's crouch, the warrior slowly crept up on the prey—the scent gave away that it was a vole—hiding in the bush. A tail-length away from the green leaves, she parted her jaws and let out a yowl soft enough to not alert the surrounding prey, but loud and fierce enough to startle the vole from under the bush. Rapidly shuffling feet pattered against the ground, and Leafsong heard the vole hurry out of the opposite side. She quickly moved to the side and crouched beside a tree that grew next to the holly bush, waiting. As the vole zipped pass her, she swiftly darted in front of

it, causing the vole to freeze in its fleeing. She felt both powerful and sorry as the terrified animal stayed put when Leafsong bent down and bit its neck. She secured it in her mouth and turned to face Brave.

The brown-and-black tom's expression was an interested one, similar to the one he gave Leafsong while she was telling him about the Clans and their ways, but with more disbelief. "It stopped in front of you," he stated, wide-eyed and blinking in surprise. "It just —it was as if it gave up and accepted the fact that you were going to kill it."

"Yeah," Leafsong mumbled with the mass of fur still in her mouth, "I guess—"

She cut herself off as an image hid her vision from Brave and the forest around her: beneath her paws was a white she-cat pinned, and her unsheathed claws slightly dug into her shoulders. Her blue eyes had a swarm of all emotions of anger, regret, defeat, and loss. Leafsong's chest suddenly began to burn and ache, and she realized that she was not breathing. Desperately, she tried to bring in air, but it seemed like her throat was closed shut and did not allow anything to pass. Just about when Leafsong was sure she was going to faint, a force rammed into her. The image faded and she saw the point of view of a mouse as she looked, dazed, at the forest above her. She gasped and gratefully took in the soothing air.

"Leafsong, are you all right?"

The great concern in Brave's voice caused her to look up at him. His was crouched beside her and saw that he was panting a small bit. She figured that he was what knocked her over, probably to force her out of the painful image. She took a few more shaky breaths and then replied slowly, "Yes, I'm fine now. It was just..." She paused to think for a moment. "I guess... a memory, from the past..."

Brave gazed at her for a few more heartbeats and then only nodded, understanding and respect showing in his eyes. He changed the subject and stated, "I will go find something for me and then we can eat. I expect you would want to go soon after that."

The tom came back a moment later carrying a blackbird in his mouth. Leafsong retrieved her vole, which she had dropped during her episode, and crouched next to Brave. They ate in silence with only the birds singing and the gentle breeze softly rattling the leaves above audible. When she finished eating, she dug a shallow hole and buries the remains of the fresh-kill.

"Are you ready?" asked Brave when he did the same. He pawed a fuzzy, black feather off his nose.

Leafsong took a deep breath and nodded. "Let's go." She got up and followed Brave through the forest. Once ThunderClan scent overwhelmed any other smells, the tom allowed her to take the lead and travel to the camp. Leafsong noticed that Brave was looking around the new territory to him.

Eventually, a mass of thorn bushes was visible between the other trees and vegetation crowding the area. Leafsong stopped several fox-lengths away and turned to her companion. "ThunderClan's camp is behind that bunch of thorns," she explained with a flick of her tail toward it. "I guess this is good-bye, then." A couple heartbeats passed in silence. Then Leafsong rushed forward and pressed her muzzle up to the tom's cheek. "Thank you so much for saving and taking care of me, Brave. You have no idea how much it means to me."

The Chosen Warrior dying because of a fire, she snorted inwardly. *How heroic.*

"You are welcome, Leafsong," the brown-and-black cat responded. She pulled back from him. "It is what I have always done—help others. But, Leafsong... may I ask you one last question?"

Leafsong looked at him with kind eyes and smiled. "Of course. What is it?"

Brave's gaze fell to the ground. Almost back to his original shy and quiet way, he requested, "Could you ask your leader if..." He took a deep breath and looked up at Leafsong directly in the eye. "If I could join ThunderClan?"

Immediately, Leafsong's spirit lightened and her ears perked up with surprise and happiness. "You want to join ThunderClan?"

Brave nodded hopefully. "For as long as I remember, I have been by myself for most of my traveling, besides meeting other cats along the way and then eventually leaving them. But when you told me about the Clans, the thought of being in a group of cats who live to help each other and give company to one another made me feel... in a way, lonely. And that I was missing the feeling of belonging to a family." He paused. "I miss that in my life."

Leafsong was suddenly aware that she barely knew anything about Brave's past life, such as why he traveled alone, or traveled in general. She was still debating whether she should ask or not when Brave asked again, "Will you do that for me?"

She nodded. "Of course, Brave." The she-cat turned and padded closer to the thorn wall. Once she got directly in front of the tunnel, she looked back at Brave, who was a tail-length behind her. "Are you ready?"

He nodded, though she could see him shaking slightly. *I don't blame him for being nervous,* Leafsong thought. *This is about to be the largest group of cats he's ever seen in one place—and he wants to join it.*

She turned back to the tunnel entrance, took a deep breath, and pushed forward. The familiar, small thorns rakes her fur as she scrambled through, and she could hear Brave struggling to follow her behind her; the tom let out a small hiss once as a thorn went too deep into his pelt.

Suddenly the cramped space around Leafsong opened up into the hollow, and light shone down between the trees. She moves aside to allow Brave to have room to exit the tunnel and look at the camp for his very first time. His eyes instantly grew wide when he scanned all the different cats, and he seemed to shrink in size.

"Welcome to ThunderClan," she murmured to him.

"Leafsong!" An ecstatic yowl sounded across the hollow, and she saw the one and only Squirrelflight bounding across the dusty

clearing towards her. The pale-ginger she-cat rushed down the slope to meet her.

"Intruder!" a different voice snarled. It inturrupted anything that either Leafsong or Squirrelflight were going to say to each other and caused both to look at the source.

Leafsong saw Spiderleg, along with Thornclaw and Dustpelt, run over toward the camp exit. Their claws were out and their fur was fluffed up to make them look twice their size. The she-cat's green gaze flickered over to the tunnel and saw Brave cowering in front of it.

She gasped. "Stop!" she begged the advancing toms. Other Clanmates had stopped their conversations and came out of their dens to see the comotion from the multiple outbursts. "He's harmless!" she insisted as she sprinted back up the slope. The she-cat managed to get in front of Brave and guard him moments before the small patrol rached and attacked him. "Don't," she growled sternly to the three toms.

"Did you lead him to our camp?" Thornclaw asked strictly.

"Yes, I did—"

"Gone for two days and she brings a stranger to our home," Dustpelt snorted fiercely. "I knew she couldn't be trusted any longer—she leaves too often! Does even StarClan know what she's doing?"

Leafsong growled in response. *Great start to being home again,* she thought sarcastically.

"What is giong on here?"

Everyone in the camp turned to look up at the Highledge and saw the bright, flame-colored tom standing tall and elegantly on it. Firestar's gaze raked across the clearing until it rested on Leafsong. "You're back," he welcomed clearly with a nod. He took in the situation of Dustpelt, Thornclaw, and Spiderleg's fur sticking up and extended claws, and then finally looked at Brave. "Who is this?"

Leafsong glanced back at the brown-and-black tom, expecting him

to answer, but he was still crouched down in fear and stared wide-eyed up at the leader. She answered for him, "This is Brave. Firestar, have you noticed that there was a fire on the far side of the territory towards ShadowClan, before it rained two days ago? And then I went missing?" She paused to allow him to answer.

He nodded slowly, and his gaze seemed distant with thought. "I was told about the burnt part of our forest, along with a bit of ShadowClan's, and saw it for myself, as well. It was obvious that a fire occurred, and it was a good thing StarClan sent the rain before it spread to the camp."

Leafsong winced a bit at the mention of StarClan.

"I undoubtedly did notice your absence," he continued, "but I assumed that" —he glanced around at his Clanmates—"you were busy doing work for the good of the Clan." He looked back at Leafsong and she nodded in understanding. She was glad that no one decided to question their leader on his word choice.

"Well, I was caught in that fire," Leafsong continued, "and was breathing in a bunch of smoke. Right when I collapsed and then lost consciousness, Brave, here"—she glanced back at the tom—"found me and took me to an area some ways outside the territory. He cared for me, Firestar—he's an amazing medicine cat!" she concluded. "He is a brilliant hunter, too."

A few moments passed while Leafsong smiled at Brave, and he gave a small shy, but grateful, smile in return. She looked at Firestar again and opened her mouth, but no words left her mouth until after a couple heartbeats. "Firestar," she asked both softly and firmly, "will you allow Brave to become a member of ThunderClan?"

Multiple gasps of surprise sounded around the hollow, followed by murmurs between groups of cats, and a few hisses of protest rose up. One was Dustpelt, who was barely a tail-length away from her.

Firestar's tail flicked and the hollow was instantly silent again. His brilliant, green gaze looked directly at Brave. "What is the reason behind you wanting to join ThunderClan?" he asked him.

Leafsong turned toward the brown-and-black tom and saw that his ears were flattened against his head. His wide emerald eyes flicked between Leafsong and Firestar, and his mouth remained closed. She gazed up at Firestar again and answered for the young tom, "For all his life he has been alone, only meeting small groups of cats in his travels and then leaving them as he continued his aimless journey. He has never had a true home, but now he is asking if ThunderClan will allow him to have him consider it his home."

Silence emitted from the hollow as all the cats held their breath for Firestar's response. The great, ginger-furred tom was narrowing his eyes in thought. It seemed like ages before he spoke.

"I will give him a chance to see if he belongs here," announced Firestar. "Come here, Brave." He made his way down the crumbled rock path that allowed access up to the Highledge.

Leafsong glanced back at the tom with happiness and success in her eyes. "Firestar accepted!" She could see that he was still nervous about all the different cats, but his form was more relaxed with relief. "Come on," Leafsong beckoned forward. "I think Firestar is going to formally welcome you into the Clan."

She led the way to beneath the Highledge, but couldn't help but notice the angry glares that her Clanmates sent at Brave, and even a few at her.

"What is she thinking, bringing a complete *stranger* into the camp?"

Leafsong glanced aside to see Ashfur and Birchfall's heads bent close together. Ashfur's lip was curled up in rage.

"Well, he *is* only one cat," Birchfall retorted to the gray tom's outburst. "What harm could he possibly do to an entire Clan?"

"You never know," growled Ashfur. "He could have more rogues rounded up to attack the camp at any time." He scanned the barrier of the hollow as if seeing out any cats lurking there.

Leafsong disregarded any other bits of conversation she picked up along the way and stopped a couple tail-lengths away from Firestar.

She told Brave to stand in front of the orange-furred tom and listen to him. She backed up a few steps to join the crowd gathering around the bottom of the hollow. Gradually, all the angry muttering died away, and Firestar raised his muzzle.

"I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, ask StarClan to allow this young cat, Brave, into the Clans. He is willing to learn the way of Clanlife and give up part of his freedom as a loner, but to receive the great reward of being with others to act as his family. Brave"—Firestar gazed gracefully down at the brown-and-black tom—"do you truly desire to join this Clan, and to remain loyal from here on after?"

The tom was standing up straight despite of his shaking legs and looked directly into the leader's blazing green eyes. Leafsong was about to go up and tell Brave what to do after a few heartbeats of silence, but right before she did, he found his voice—however soft it was—and answered, "Yes, I do, Firestar."

A fresh wave of soft gasps and whispers crashed around the gathered cats. Leafsong understood their shock, for how could an outsider like Brave be so formal with his answer to a question similar to the one they were all asked? She then realized that she had not mentioned any of the ceremonies the leader preformed for new apprentices and warriors. Brave was doing this on his own.

As the murmurs subsided, Firestar, who looked impressed, nodded in acceptance. "Since I am not sure if you will be staying here permanently or not," the great tom spoke clearly, "I will give you the choice: Do you long to keep your current name, or have it be Bravepaw, to symbolize that you are a true apprentice of the Clan?"

Leafsong could see Brave's body tense up. He lowered his gaze in thought, contemplating the two choices. The hollow was silent as the tom stood there. Finally after many moments, Brave met Firestar's gaze again, opened his mouth, and—

"ThunderClan doesn't need any more apprentices! We're strong enough with the warriors we have!"

The fierce outburst cut through the quiet like the first boom of thunder before the rain even began to fall. Every head, including

Brave's wide-eyed, ear-flattened one, snapped to the source of the yowling. She could feel the rumbling in her throat as she let out a soft growl when she laid her eyes on Whitesnake standing up defiantly, lashing his tail. His emerald green eyes burned into Brave's pelt.

Beside him, Whitesnake's sister, Shiningice, glanced at him and stood up with her white, gray-dappled fur bristling. "And can he even fight?" she added on to her brother's words. "He's so thin; a newly appointed apprentice could tackle him! Plus, we already have Leafpool and Jaypaw to heal our wounds and cure sickness. We manage perfectly fine with hunting. He's of no use!"

More yowls rose up among the cats, mainly of protest against Brave joining the Clan.

"What of the apprentices, though?" Hazelpaw spoke up, her gray fur fluffed out from the debate. "Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Cinderheart became warriors two days ago. We need more apprentices!"

"We could always just have warriors help if needed," Cinderheart pointed out softly, running her tail along Hazelpaw's flank to calm her down.

"Whitesnake and Shiningice are right," Thornclaw agreed. "All he will do is be an extra mouth to feed and burden to the Clan."

"Would you say that about a kit?" Ferncloud's usual gentle voice was now fierce with defense. Beside her, Daisy gathered her two kits, Rosekit and Toadkit, with her tail as if attempting to protect them from all the words being thrown out. "I would think the Clans would accept any sort of poor soul willing to join," the cream she-cat spoke strictly.

As the yowling of her Clanmates continued to grow around her, Leafsong scanned the hollow, looking at each of her Clanmates. Dustpelt and Spiderleg had come over to their mates and were discussing the matter with them next to the nursery. At the back of the crowd near the elders' den, it seemed like Mousefur and Longtail were on the side of allowing Brave to join the Clan as they would occasionally send disgusted looks over at a group containing

of the new warrior Lionblaze, Thornclaw, and Ashfur, who must have gotten annoyed of Birchfall.

Her eyes flicked back over to where Whitesnake and Shiningice were from before. The big, gray tom's fur was spiked with indignation as he battled verbally with Squirrelflight and her daughter, Hollyleaf. She quickly hurried across the sandy floor and pushed her way through bickering cats. Before she could nudge between the four warriors, she glanced around and saw Darkpaw, with Dapplepaw beside him, arguing with Foxpaw. The young, red-furred apprentice was lashing his tail fiercely, and Leafsong could see the tips of his claws peeking out of his sheathes. A heartbeat later, she noticed his haunches tense and realized what he was planning to do. With the speed of WindClan, Leafsong rushed over to the apprentice and grabbed his scruff, pulling him backward just as he launched himself at Darkpaw.

Foxpaw turned into a ball of squirming fur as he flailed his paws around in protest. Leafsong lied on top of him, allowing her full bodyweight to push down on him and waited until the poor scrap finally stopped fighting back. She slowly lifted herself off the panting apprentice. She then scolded him, "That is *enough.* If I see you doing that again, I will tell Brambleclaw to assign you to a moon of taking care of the elders. *Alone."* She nudged Darkpaw and Dapplepaw, who were almost as large as a young warrior now, towards Squirrelflight and the other arguing cats to keep them away from Foxpaw and out of more trouble.

"At least give him a chance!" Hollyleaf was spitting at Whitesnake and Shiningice. "Don't you know that ThunderClan allowed you to join because you were found randomly along the WindClan border?"

Leafsong immediately halted in her walking as she heard Hollyleaf. Both Whitesnake and Shiningice's eyes zipped to her, and both their gazes were like a firestorm. Leafsong assumed that Whitesnake told his two sisters about their conversation a few nights ago. She narrowed her eyes at them and quickly prepared her own smaller outburst, but was saved from doing so as a mighty yowl sounded from the front of the raging crowd.

"Silence!" Firestar's forceful screech cut through the overpowering growling and hissing. Within a heartbeat, the hollow's noise dispersed and left it strangely quiet. Every cat froze and turned their head to look at Firestar standing rigidly. "I seem to not understand you all—we have had five new cats join us these past moons, and none had a problem. And now you are telling me that one more cat joining our Clan is not acceptable?" The leader's burning gaze swiped across the gathered cats in silence as no one answered. At last, he focused on the overwhelmed Brave again and repeated the question that caused all the turmoil. "Do you wish to remain to be called Brave, or to transform it into Bravepaw?" The orange-furred tom leaned closer to the young cat and murmured just loud enough for Leafsong to hear with perked ears, "Do not let your choice depend on your surroundings."

Just like the previous time, Brave took a few moments to think again about his name. Silence rang around the hollow, although tension was now crackling in the air between the Clan cats.

"Come on, Brave," a voice whispered so softly somewhere behind Leafsong that it could have been the breeze. "Don't feel pressured or forced by these mouse-hearts..."

Eventually, the brown-and-black tom raised his head to look directly at Firestar once again and opened his mouth. "I wish to be called Bravepaw, Firestar."

No gasps or protests went out among the Clan as he announced his choice. Leafsong felt a small swirl of admiration within her at ho, even after the event that took place, the tom still chose to use the Clan version of his name. As she saw Firestar nod in acceptance and a twinkle light in his green eyes, she knew that the leader was also greatly impressed with how the newcomer, the cat who's been alone mainly his entire life, took this situation.

"Very well, then," the ginger tom commented happily. He raised his muzzle to the bright blue sky above and began the ceremony. "StarClan, an outsider has asked to join this Clan and to serve it by your ways. He is willing to learn what Clanlife is like and to hopefully become more to this Clan." He looked down at the fidgeting tom. "Brave, from this day on, until you receive your

warrior name—and if you decide upon your own thoughts and opinions to stay—you will be known as Bravepaw. We are ecstatic to have you enter ThunderClan and hopefully stay for a long time." With the last of his words still echoing in the hollow, Firestar reached forward and touched noses with the newly-named Bravepaw.

The chanting of the young tom's name exploded from the gathered cats, though Leafsong noticed it wasn't as loud as usual. Joining in proudly, she easily figured that all the cats who were awaiting Bravepaw to join the Clan were shouting his Clan name vigorously, whereas those who protested his joining stood with mouths clamped shut and frustrated expressions on. Leafsong noticed that one of the loudest of the chanting came behind her, but as she turned to see who the voice belonged to, the chanting altogether died away. The pale-ginger she-cat saw only Icepaw sitting a few tail-lengths away, and that Frostdrop crouched almost hidden by her brother and sister. Thinking nothing of her, Leafsong was going to look back at Firestar and Bravepaw, but barely noticed the little glimmer of pride in the silver, white-dotted she-cat in her crystal blue eyes.

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 9

"Leafsong, you will be responsible for Bravepaw," Firestar announced as the she-cat padded over to the new member of the Clan. "Treat him as you would an apprentice."

Leafsong nodded at the leader. "Will do, Firestar. Thank you," she added with a polite and respectful dip of her head.

Firestar blinked back a welcome. "Feel free to get something to eat from the fresh-kill pile if either of you are hungry," he offered kindly with a glance at Bravepaw.

"Thank you, but we have already eaten before we came here," replied Leafsong, guilt slightly arising within her.

"That is perfectly fine, Leafsong," the leader responded with a reassuring nod. "It makes sense to want to have a full belly and a clear mind coming back like this."

Before any of the cats could say more, Squirrelflight trotted over. Her fur was still ruffled from the arguing, but she had a friendly face on. "Welcome to ThunderClan, Bravepaw," the ginger she-cat greeted benignly. "Sorry that your first time coming here was accompanied by...that." She looked sideways awkwardly.

"Hi, Bravepaw!" Dapplepaw chirped as she scampered over to the small group. "We're so glad to have another apprentice in the Clan. My name is Dapplepaw, and that's my brother, Darkpaw." She motioned her tail toward the black-furred tom coming up behind.

"Squirrelflight," Darkpaw asked his mentor, "do you think we could take Bravepaw out and show him the territory?"

Squirrelflight and Leafsong exchanged glances. "I don't see why not," she answered her apprentice.

"Dapplepaw, you can go ask Sorreltail if she wants to come with us," Leafsong offered.

The brown, black-spotted she-cat's eyes lit up and perked up her ears. "Alright!" She went off in search of her mentor.

"We will be back in a bit," Squirrelflight told Firestar, who was still standing among the small group.

He looked on with a proud stance and a pleasing sparkle in his eyes. She walked a few paces forward to lick her father's ear affectionately before leading the way up to the thorn tunnel. Once Dapplepaw returned with Sorreltail, the six cats set out.

"Let's go down along the lake first," Leafsong suggested, walking beside Squirrelflight and with Bravepaw near her other side. "Bravepaw has been living beyond the Clan borders, and the lake is a must-see."

The group trekked through the undergrowth and dodged trees as they made their way closer to the lakeshore. They had come upon a fallen log that blocked the route, and Darkpaw jumped on top of it.

"Last one to the lake is crow-food!" he challenged and, before he finished saying his words, jumped to the other side. The clattering of rustling undergrowth faded away as he sprinted through the forest.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Dapplepaw growled mischievously as she followed her brother's lead.

The remaining cats in the group picked up their pace to catch up to the two playful apprentices. The lake was still not visible between the vegetation when crashing grew louder and closer to them. A heartbeat later, both Darkpaw and Dapplepaw burst through a patch of bracken fronds, their eyes wide with exhilaration.

"You all have to come see this," insisted Darkpaw, who was barely out of breath in spite of his dash. "Come on!" Once again, he spun around and ran back the way he had come. After a few deep breaths to get her breath back, Dapplepaw followed again, but kept

further behind to lead the rest of the cats. Leafsong's curiosity of what could possibly so interesting was peaked as she hurried after the apprentice.

Finally, they broke through the forest's edge, and smooth pebbles pressed gently into their paw pads. Leafsong slowed down and came to a stop as she saw what the littermates were so excited about.

A few fox-lengths from the shore, a large, firm tree branch was sticking out from the water at an angle. A smaller branch stuck out on one side of the main one, but still looked thick enough to hold a decent amount of weight. At the end of the main part of the branch, Darkpaw crouched there, looking into the water a good tail-length or two beneath, which also had some leaves strewn across its surface around the branch. Dapplepaw had, rather hesitantly at first, waded into the lake and was swimming the rest of the distance to the large branch. She clambered up onto it, using the gentle slope of where the branch protruded from the pebble-and-sand floor underneath the branch to help her and balanced along it to get to the smaller branch to the side. She slowly sat down on it and then looked over at the staring group of cats on the shore.

"Isn't this amazing?" the apprentice called to them joyfully. "It's so cool and relaxing!"

Squirrelflight and Sorreltail began to inch forward to get closer to the edge of the lake and get a better look. Leafsong looked up and noticed that they were near the Ancient Oak. A large gap among the leaves and branches was easily visible, and on the edge of one shortened branch was only splinters of wood that tore off of it. She assumed that the heavy rain from the other day caused it to break off and fall into the lake below. A shudder passed through her at the thought of being crushed by one of those branches.

"Do you want to join them on the log, Bravepaw?" Leafsong looked at her apprentice.

However, he shook his head. "I would rather not. The lake *is* beautiful and all, but I do not like water that much." He stared out at the expansive lake, and his thoughtful, green eyes clouded. Leafsong did not bother asking what was going through his mind.

Probably just a bad memory or something, she concluded.

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When the six-cat group returned to the camp, the sun was already setting, causing the sky with its few clouds to dance with a mixture of midnight blue, rose pink, sun-kissed orange, and cherry red. The pinpricks of the brightest stars were beginning to appear above, and the waxing moon was gradually climbing higher over the hills on the moor.

The group had stayed at the log for a while longer to play on it and stare in awe at how perfect it had fallen into the lake below. Leafsong had then led the way along the WindClan border to show Bravepaw one of the rival Clans' territories and learn the scent in case he ever came across an intruder. They ended up going to the abandoned Twoleg den, informing the newcomer that it could be a good place to hunt for mine, and that Leafpool and Jaypaw's catmint grow in the area behind it.

Leafsong swiped her tongue around her mouth to clean off the last scraps of the vole she had just finished. Beside her, Bravepaw was finishing off eating a thrush, rubbing his paw against his nose to nudge off a loose feather. On her other side, Squirrelflight stood up, stretched, and yawned.

"I'm exhausted!" The ginger she-cat clamped her jaws shut after the yawn. "It's been a long day. I'm going to my nest. Goodnight, you two." Her paws dragged along the ground as she made her way over to the warriors' den.

"I'm going to retire to my nest, as well," Leafsong told Bravepaw. "I am pretty sure that there is already a new nest for you in the apprentices' den. Darkpaw is already in there—he'll show you where it is."

The brown-and-black tom nodded gratefully. "Thank you, Leafsong. And thank you for doing all of this for me, already on my first day here."

"Don't worry about it." The she-cat gently flicked his ear with her

tail-tip. "You saved my life from that fire and took care of me; this is the least I could do to repay you." The mentor and apprentice gazed at each other thankfully until Leafsong meowed farewell with a nod and padded over to the warriors' den.

Inside was gloomy, but right as she entered she felt a pair of eyes stare at her and follow her as she walked. She did not look to find who it was until she had gotten comfortable in her bracken nest. On the other side of the den and over a few sleeping bodies, Whitesnake's eyes were burning straight into her own. The fur along Leafsong's spine began to prickle and she swallowed. As if he was glad to leave her with that uneasiness, Whitesnake looked away and shuffled in his own nest. Leafsong did the same and squeezed her eyes shut, wishing that the tom won't cause too much trouble in the days to come.

*****

A soft rustling reached Leafsong's ears and caused her to open her eyes back up. The close, pressing walls of the den had disappeared as she saw the vast Dark Forest surrounding her. She turned toward the source of the rustling and saw Nightblaze padding toward her, pushing herself up as she did.

"Hello," the black tom greeted friendly. It seemed as if all traces of the previous, awkward conversation they had last time had vaporized. "I was wondering if you would visit again tonight. Wolfscar has put me up to the task to find out if you are coming or not, and then escort you to wherever we train."

"You might as well escort me there now." Leafsong blinked. After a few moments of Nightblaze studying the she-cat, only then did he begin walking through the murky forest.

The two trekked along in silence. Every now and then, Nightblaze would glance back at Leafsong. He eventually, after long moments of doing so, stopped in his footsteps and turned fully around to face her.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, his midnight blue eyes narrowed with concern.

Leafsong took this by surprise. *How does he know something is bothering me? We only met each other last night!* After multiple heartbeats of contemplating whether to tell the truth of not, she decided that she needed to tell *someone* about her problems, and she could see in Nightblaze's eyes that he truly did care, despite the fact that they are merely acquaintances and, not to mention, he is part of the Dark Forest. *He seems different from most Dark Forest cats, thought,* Leafsong observed.

With a deep sigh, Leafsong responded, "No, Nightblaze. I feel as if I am caught in a web and am just waiting for the spider to come get me. A few days ago, a cat outside the Clans rescued me from a fire that started in the forest. He took care of me up until today, when I returned to ThunderClan. He wanted to join the Clan, though, and did earlier today. He has always wanted to live with a family, but some of the cats in my Clan are against him joining. One in particular is a tom who I got into a fight with just the night before the fire happened. It's obvious he hates every single piece of fur on my pelt. I'm afraid of what he will do to me or Bravepaw, the new apprentice."

Nightblaze was looking directly into Leafsong's eyes, and his jaw was tightened as if he wished to bite down on something. Or some*one*. "I'm so sorry about that, Leafsong," he condoled, "but I can see why others could be so against outsiders joining a Clan." A couple more heartbeats of silence passed. "Who is the tom who is causing the most trouble?" The way he voiced the question sounded acutely serious.

Leafsong's face screwed up in a confused manner. "I doubt you would know him, but his name is Whitesnake."

Unexpectedly, Nightblaze's figure stood rigid, and he took an eager step forward. "What does he look like?" he asked urgently

"What?" Leafsong was dumbfounded by his behavior.

"Like, what color is his fur and his eyes?" A small bit of impatience edged his voice.

"Err, he's mainly gray, but he has a stripe of white running along his

spine. His eyes are green."

Silence hit her answer. Nightblaze's gaze seemed to cloud as it remained on Leafsong. "I've seen him before." His words seeped out of his slightly parted mouth like mist and are softer than a kit's fur.

"What?" Leafsong imitated his voice as she stared wide-eyed at him. "No—no, that can't be him. He lives in ThunderClan, like me. He..." Her words faded away as she waited for an explanation.

Nightblaze's intense blue eyes refocused on Leafsong and bore into hers. "No, he's been here, in the Dark Forest. I saw him with another cat... a she-cat. Her name is... err..."

"Owlheart," Leafsong finished in a daze.

The black tom nodded slowly. "Yes. Her name is Owlheart, you're old mentor. She is training Whitesnake."

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Chapter 10

The new knowledge that Whitesnake is being trained in the Dark Forest by Owlheart stuck with Leafsong all through her training session with Nightblaze and Wolfscar up to now. She yanked her eyes open slowly to get used to the sudden daylight shining into the warriors' den. All but a couple other nests were empty with Lionblaze and Berrynose stirring awake. She stood up, shook out her pelt, and took a long stretch, her jaws parting in a large yawn.

Her muscles were aching slightly from the training session last night, and a decent claw mark on her upper back stung a bit from where Nightblaze scratched her. The tom had still gone easy on her, but he told her afterwards, away from their mentor, that he had only done that to make it seem more realistic to Wolfscar. Leafsong said that it was fine, as she had given him two good marks: one on his foreleg and one on his hindquarters.

As the pale ginger she-cat emerged from the den, she observed that most of the Clan was having their morning meal, eating together in multiple groups of two to five cats dotted around the camp. She saw that all Squirrelflight, Darkpaw, Dapplepaw, and even Bravepaw were eating a few tail-lengths away from the fresh-kill pile. Leafsong trotted across the hollow floor to the pile, snatched a plump crow off the top of it, and then went over to crouch in a spot between Bravepaw and Squirrelflight.

"Morning!" the ginger warrior chirped with a mouthful of mouse. She swallowed. "Sleep well?"

Leafsong shrugged and replied simply while tucking into her fresh-kill, "It could have been better."

"Hey," her friend nudged her playfully, "at least you've gotten over those nightmares."

For a moment, she was confused, but then her memory cleared.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She took her first bite of her crow.

As the five cats ate and chatted, Jaypaw came across the hollow from the medicine cats' den and stopped at the edge of the group.

"Leafsong, can I talk to you for a moment, please?" the gray tabby tom asked.

The she-cat was surprised by both how polite the usually-grumpy apprentice was and that he wanted to talk to her, but she could see why, as the two haven't had a conversation since she had fainted.

And since I abandoned StarClan, and when we had that... strange talk, she recalled.

"Sure," she answered. She took one more bite of her crow before following the tom back up to the medicine cats' den.

"It's been a while since we talked," Jaypaw murmured.

Leafsong nodded awkwardly. "It sure has..."

A few heartbeats passed.

"I've noticed that you and Whitesnake have been at the start of a sort of feud since you came back yesterday," he began slowly. "What happened between you two? It seemed like you were both decent friends."

A mixture of annoyance at Jaypaw and renewing anger at Whitesnake started burning at the back of Leafsong's throat, but she didn't feel like putting up a fight and, although slightly hesitantly, answered the apprentice's question. "Well, we *were* decent friends, for a while, but then on the night before the fire—four days ago, now, I think—he had asked me to meet him by the lakeshore. He...he asked me if I knew who his parents are, and I said I knew who his mother was..." She paused and took a deep breath, then looked at Jaypaw. "Swiftclaw is his mother, along with Shiningice and Frostdrop. The one who I told to leave—"

She cut herself off to swallow. She was beginning to tremble at the bad, remorseful memories reappearing like twigs washing up on the

shore of the lake. Her claws scraped at the stone beneath her paws as she fought to push the thoughts away and continue talking. "I told Swiftclaw to leave the Clans and to not come back. When Whitesnake learned that I did that, he got furious and—well, now we're here. He hates Bravepaw, and I don't think just because Bravepaw doesn't have Clan blood. Most likely because of me because I brought him here."

After a couple heartbeats when Leafsong finished talking, Jaypaw mused, "Bravepaw is a great addition to the Clan—you'd think cats who are actually raised in a Clan their entire life will be smart enough to see that." He snorted. "Guess not. Now, come in the den. Let me clean that scratch of yours, while you tell me where and how you got it."

Stunned with the raising of his voice at the last part of his words, Leafsong slowly followed the tom into the medicine cats' den. She had not thought that he noticed her wound.

"Of course I noticed your wound," he muttered over his shoulder, once again shocking her at how he responded to her unspoken thought. "Crouch down there"—he motioned with his tail to a spot near the center of the small cavern—"and then tell me what happened." He then added, "Leafpool went out to check on the catmint at the old Twoleg nest, if you are concerned about her."

After the medicine cat apprentice had come back from the herb storage carrying a bundle of goldenrod leaves and began chewing up the poultice, Leafsong reluctantly explained, "Last night I went to the Dark Forest. Two nights ago, when I visited there again for the first time since I told Swiftclaw to leave the Clans, I was moved to a new mentor named Wolfscar, who already had an apprentice that I train with now, called Nightblaze. Usually Wolfscar just watches us fight, and that's where I got this scratch."

She was glad that Jaypaw was kind enough to not interrupt her until she finished talking, but his reaction to it was not pleasant.

"You're *still* going to the Dark Forest?" Jaypaw hissed, managing to lower his voice so no one would hear his outburst. "Even after you learned that Owlheart was using you, and Swiftclaw tricked you

into almost killing Squirrelflight, and then tried to kill you? I even told you that you can't go back there!"

A small burn or irritation caused Leafsong to push herself to her feet, discarding her unfinished treatment, and narrowed her eyes at Jaypaw. "I didn't *want* to go back there—or at least wasn't planning," she muttered. "I was still out with Bravepaw when I fell asleep and all of a sudden, I was in the Dark Forest. I don't even know if I can truly control when I want to go there or not." She paused shortly, looked away, and then refocused her gaze on the tom. "What happened between me and Swiftclaw, and I suppose Owlheart herself, is possibly the reason behind me being sent off to a new mentor, but I'm not positive."

"And how is this Wolfscar and Nightblaze treating you, then?" asked Jaypaw. His rage seemed to lessen a fraction now, and a small hint of curiosity began to gleam in his milky eyes. "I'm guessing Nightblaze, not so well," he commented with a nod to the wound.

Leafsong started to shuffle her paws on the stone floor of the den. "Wolfscar is pretty strict. Last night, he snapped at me for not getting a move right and yowled at Nightblaze for simply placing his paw in the wrong spot. He also scratched Nightblaze's paw as punishment." Leafsong flinched at the memory of the harsh scold. "And Nightblaze... he is actually decently kind. I mean, he goes easy on me when we fight—only giving me this scratch to make it look more realistic—and we usually have a conversation both before and after the training session. He seems... different than the typical Dark Forest cat, in a way."

Leafsong's body jolted as the memory of last night's conversation before the session came flooding back. Jaypaw seemed to notice this as he stood up straighter, and his curiosity increased.

"What's the matter?" he asked seriously. "What happened?"

Leafsong only hesitated a little until she figured that the new information should be shared with the medicine cat apprentice. *He'll have to find out eventually,* she concluded. *And maybe he could help me out if need be.* She took a deep breath and answered, "Last night, I was talking to Nightblaze about my problem with

Whitesnake. When I gave more description of him, he said he recognized him. He told me that he had seen Whitesnake being trained in the Dark Forest. By Owlheart."

Jaypaw remained silent, his eyes even more cloudy than usual, and a muscle on his mouth twitched once. He nodded. "Thanks for telling me this, Leafsong. Here, let me finish this up." He stepped to Leafsong's side, grabbed the poultice, and, as the she-cat crouched down to allow him easier access, spread it across her wound. "I would think it will heal quickly," informed Jaypaw. "Let me take a took at it tomorrow sometime, will you?"

The warrior nodded and thanked him, pushing herself up, but as she was a paw step from leaving the den, Jaypaw spoke again one last time. She looked back at him.

"And Leafsong, if you're comfortable enough about it," Jaypaw questioned, "would you mind paying a bit more attention for signs of Whitesnake while you are in the Dark Forest? You don't necessarily have to sneak through the forest in hopes of finding him, though. I'm going to definitely pay more attention to him in the waking world."

Leafsong met his gaze steadily. "I'll try my best." Then she turned and padded out of the den.

"Fox's breath! We don't need you! Just leave!"

The unpleasant, sharp outburst made Leafsong stop just a few steps outside the bramble screen and flick her gaze to the source:

Beside the fresh-kill pile, she could see Whitesnake's and Shiningice's bristling backs facing her. A couple tail-lengths away, Frostdrop stood, rather tensely and rigidly, next to her agitating littermates. Her body angle was turned more than the others' so that her face was easily seen, her eyes big and wide with noticeable worry. She was slightly flattening her ears, and Leafsong could see her shifting from side to side.

As if she wants to... intervene? she wondered.

"I can't believe Firestar even allowed you to step foot in this camp."

Whitesnake's raging voice interrupted any further of her thoughts and pushed her to strain to see who was cornered against the camp wall between the two warriors. Just in the narrow cracks between the brother and sister, a bulk of black fur and then brown on the edges was barely visible. Leafsong distinguished it immediately.

"Whitesnake, leave Bravepaw alone!" Leafsong sprinted across the clearing, dodging staring Clanmates, and halted behind Whitesnake and Shiningice, who both turned around to glare at her. She forced herself not to flinch as Whitesnake's fierce gaze burned into hers.

He snorted. *"Bravepaw,"* the large gray tom sneered. "He doesn't even deserve that name, and especially doesn't deserve to be part of ThunderClan."

Leafsong twitched her whiskers as if in slight amusement at his minor mistake. "Need I remind you that you have no ThunderClan blood within you?"

His eyes lit up with fury and he took a heavy step forward, towering over her. "At least I *am* Clanborn," he growled lowly.

The two warriors glared at each other with hatred for a moment longer. "At least he is already a better warrior than you'll ever be." She paused and then backed away, looking at her apprentice who was shockingly standing very calmly as if the scene didn't affect him at all. "Come on, Bravepaw. I'm taking you out on patrol." After the brown-and-black tom hopped past Shiningice, who hissed at him as he did, Leafsong led the way to the exit of the camp.

"I can make him surrender with a single scratch on the flank," Whitesnake called after her.

Only several steps from the thorn tunnel, Leafsong paused in her tracks to look the tom directly in the eye one last time. "I said *warrior,* Whitesnake, not fighter." With only a quick glimpse of his shown shock at the retort, Leafsong faced forward and pushed out into the forest.

The air around her was ringing with birdsong in trees here and there, but she struggled to settle her rising anger. She twitched as she stomped through the forest, and her claws kept poking out of her sheathes until she forced them back under cover. The image of her slicing her claws through Whitesnake's fur sent a quick, one-heartbeat overall pulse of rage and power beneath her skin before residing again. He deserved it so much—but how will Leafsong keep him from telling all their Clanmates that she attacked him and use it against her? All it will do is lead to even more chaos.

"Leafsong, stop!"

She was pulled out of her blinding fury and became aware of her surroundings. Taking a single breath, bringing in an overwhelming amount of ShadowClan scent mingled with burnt wood and ash, it stopped short as the disgusting smell caused her to double over and break out into a coughing attack. In a moment, a furry figure was beside her, but only when she stopped coughing did she notice the presence of two other cats.

"Are you okay, Leafsong?"

Leafsong swiveled her head toward the source of the voice and saw Squirrelflight staring at her with wide, concerned eye. Next to her, Darkpaw was copying his mentor. Bravepaw stood beside Darkpaw and was looking around, his gaze seeming lost in his own thoughts. She had no clue how long they had been with her, but she was glad.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied. Anything else she would have said was left unspoken as she gazed around at the burnt part of the forest. All the trees were charred and leafless. The ground was covered in soot, and several fallen branches and tree trunks littered the floor. The undergrowth had all been burned up, but if she looked closely, Leafsong could see small, green shoots sprouting out of the ground and pushing through the layer of ash. It was relieving to know that new life was already beginning to grow where the fire thought it had destroyed.

"Get back, hurry!" Squirrelflight gasped out an urgent whisper. She nudged Leafsong backward as a boost and quickly led the way over to two close trees near each other. She motioned with her tail for

Leafsong and the others to hide behind them and then crouched down, peering out from behind the charred trunk as the apprentices found cover behind a fallen log.

Leafsong followed the orange warrior's gaze and saw a group of three cats on ShadowClan's side of the border. Every now and then they paused to either sniff or renew the scent markers.

"Ugh! I can't smell anything besides burnt wood!" a tabby she-cat complained, her nose twitching.

"Maybe it is fair to be stealing some of RiverClan's prey, then, since the other end of our territory is no good for hunting," mused a dark brown tom.

Leafsong's interest instantly perked up and she leaned in closer, straining her ears to hear every word spoken.

"That's actually a pretty good point to make, Toadfoot," the tortoiseshell she-cat complimented. "We should bring that up to Blackstar."

"And then maybe he can convince Leapordstar that we need the land prey more than them, since they have all the fish in the lake to eat," growled the tabby again. Leafsong began to distinguish her as Kinkfur due to her pelt sticking up in random directions.

The tortoiseshell snorted. "I don't see why those fish-faces won't allow us to catch only their land prey to help us out with this mouse-hearted drought. Why would we want to eat fish?" She stuck her tongue out. "Gross!"

The rest of the conversation faded away into the distance as the patrol carried on down the border, but what the ShadowClan cats carelessly threw into the open remained fresh in Leafsong's mind.

"Should we tell Firestar?" Squirrelflight was looking at her, her green eyes dazzling a bit with excitement and mischief.

Leafsong took a moment to think. "I don't know," she admitted. "Maybe we should? The Gathering is in a few days, isn't it?" She looked at her friend and waited for a nod. "If this is a big problem

between RiverClan and ShadowClan, one might need our help at some point."

Squirrelflight nodded in agreement. "That's a thought. And even if Firestar is kind of notorious for helping other Clans," she added slowly with a small flinch of hurt for her father, "I would think it would help a Clan in the long run."

"Maybe the Clan will ask us to help them?" Darkpaw contemplated as he and Bravepaw trotted out from behind the trunk up to the warriors.

"That's a thought," Leafsong echoed Squirrelflight, smirking at her. "Come on. I suppose we should just finish this... unintended border patrol."

As Leafsong led the way along the ShadowClan border and through the sad, burnt part of the forest, she found her thoughts not thinking about the rival Clans' issues, but about the tortoiseshell she-cat. Something seemed extremely familiar about her, and not remembering her name at the moment was like torture, but gradually, as her memory cleared of fog and faint recollections appeared of screeches and pain from injuries, of someone tackling her from behind as she scanned the battle and pinning her within pinpricked claws in her chest, of the cat's eyes hovering about her, lit with the light of battle and softening just a bit, though her claws help their firm grip. Of a call to tell ShadowClan to retreat.

A wave of remembrance crashed into her.

That was Tawnypelt.

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 11

Over the past three days, Leafsong's thoughts of Whitesnake were never ending. She had gone to the Dark Forest two more times and paid close attention for a hint of his presence there, but unfortunately found nothing. She had asked Nightblaze if he saw anything, though he responded that he couldn't find Whitesnake or Owlheart anywhere he searched in the forest.

That just added onto the several questions Leafsong already had swimming constantly in her mind: Why is Owlheart training Whitesnake in the first place? Is she planning on using him in some way like she did with Swiftclaw, who was pained from losing her family and all she loved? Perhaps Whitesnake was getting information about Swiftclaw through Owlheart, or felt like Owlheart was the closest she-cat to his mother? And now, where have they gone? Did they find out that Leafsong knew that Whitesnake trained in the Dark Forest and needed to go someplace more secluded?

Accompanied by the questions, the dark feeling of anxiety always began to stir inside Leafsong at the possibility of Whitesnake knowing that she's the Chosen Warrior. Owlheart *must* have known from the first time Leafsong woke up in the Dark Forest, for why would she call her there to begin with? Mayhap she told Whitesnake and was turning him into somewhat of a tool to do the business Swiftclaw failed to do for Owlheart. But then, why couldn't Owlheart just kill Leafsong herself, after all the times they were alone together in the Dark Forest?

With that unsettling thought, her anger at StarClan resurfaced, making her struggle to push it back down to avoid either having her Clanmates ask what was wrong or accidently lashing out at them for something they had to part in.

Leafsong forced herself out of her jumbled thoughts to pay attention to Firestar announcing who will be attending the Gathering tonight. The sky above was already black with the familiar pattern of stars

strewn across. The full moon shone brightly, its light overpowering the vulnerable shadows beneath it. In the camp, the Clan was gathered in the center of the hollow around Firestar and Brambleclaw, ears perked to see if they are chosen to go represent ThunderClan. As the leader called each cat's name, they moved over to the bottom of the exit and waited for Firestar to lead the way with eager eyes and fluffed-out fur. Leafsong saw Squirrelflight and Darkpaw join the others as they were called, Sorreltail and Dapplepaw, who was jumping around excitedly, soon following them.

When Leafsong heard her name being called, she started walking over to the soon-departing cats, but her steps faltered to a stop.

"Bravepaw, you are coming, too, with your mentor," Firestar meowed.

However, before either Leafsong or Bravepaw could move or speak, a painful all-too-familiar voice cut in.

"Do you really think the other Clans will react kindly to a complete stranger going to the heart of the territories?" Whitesnake snarled. "If you do, you're mouse-brained." He began taking long strides over to Bravepaw, his head lowered and tail lashing. "Why don't you *get it* yet? You may be 'welcomed' in this Clan, but the others will never accept you, only some of their soft-hearted cats."

He was closing in on Bravepaw now, forcing him backward toward the hollow wall. Cats watched on with anger, interest, annoyance, or maybe a mixture of all. However, with Leafsong, it was pure fury building up inside her. Just before she was going to step forward and unleash her rage at Whitesnake, a tail-tip rested on her flank. She turned to see Jaypaw beside her, who nodded in a specific direction.

Leafsong turned her head to look in the direction he motioned in and saw Shiningice standing, watching her brother yell at Bravepaw. She showed no emotion.

If she starts helping out Whitesnake, she's not going to like the outcome, she growled in her mind, glaring at the she-cat.

"No, look behind her," Jaypaw murmured in her ear.

Leafsong did as she was told and saw Frostdrop crouched on the other side of Shiningice, making her hard to see from her point of view. However, something looked off about the usual quiet, shy she-cat. Her silver and white-dappled pelt was fluffed out, causing it to look spikey. Her normal wide, self-conscious sapphire eyes were now narrowed and filled with a fire so fierce it made Leafsong rock on her paws as if a blow had just hit her. The moonlight revealed Frostdrop's unsheathed claws as they glinted—almost menacingly. Leafsong stared at the she-cat.

It was as if she were a completely different cat.

The sudden loudness in Whitesnake's words forced her to turn her attention back to him and Bravepaw. Her apprentice was fully backed up against the wall, his hindquarters pressed against it and his tail down.

"You will *never* be fully accepted, so you might as well just die!" As Whitesnake screeched and raised an unsheathed paw, Leafsong bunched her muscles to sprint forward and stop him.

"No!"

She froze at the shriek and a blur of silver seemingly flew across the camp. As Whitesnake brought his claws downward, Frostdrop jumped between him and Bravepaw. The gray tom couldn't pull back in time and raked his sister's shoulder. A gasp went around the camp, but all Leafsong could do was watch Frostdrop with pure awe.

The she-cat straightened from her flinch from the attack and stood in front of Bravepaw, her eyes glaring up at her brother with rage-filled eyes. It was as if she wasn't pouring out blood from the fresh wound caused by him. "Enough, Whitesnake! Leave Bravepaw alone." Her voice was no longer the rare, soft sound it usually was, but instead a low, demanding growl that easily reached across the hollow. "I am *sick* of listening to you argue about Bravepaw joining ThunderClan and watching you treat him like he's crowfood. All he wants is a place to call home, along with a family." She paused and

looked Whitesnake directly in the eye. "I would think you, out of any of us, would understand that the most."

The two littermates stared at each other for a long moment before Frostdrop glanced over her shoulder, called "Let's go, Bravepaw" softer than the voice she had just used, and treaded across the hollow floor toward the camp exit, Bravepaw following her close behind. Frostdrop's eyelids were twitching rapidly from her fury, and although she held it high, her tail-tip flicked side to side, sending waved of anger throughout the hollow. The awestruck Clanmates made way for them, not uttering a word. Whitesnake stood staring after his sister, his face emotionless, while Shiningice sat, looking down at her paws. The last of Bravepaw's tail was devoured by the thorn tunnel, and the camp was silent, but the camp still had a slight singe.

Before she knew it, Leafsong's paws started moving forward, and she was out of the camp, tracking where Bravepaw and Frostdrop went. With a small shift in the breeze, the smell of two mingled scents reached her. She pushed on. Not long after, Leafsong found the two cats together sitting on top of a fallen log, their heads bent close as they talked. As quietly as she could, the pale ginger she-cat crept around and tried to get as close as she could with the cover of trees and bushes. She halted when their quiet words reached her ears.

"I just can't see why Whitesnake would protest so much about you joining ThunderClan," Frostdrop was meowing. Her voice had returned to its normal quietness, but Leafsong knew it was from either her throat being raw from yowling or to try to keep others from over hearing, which she was currently failing at. "He *knows* we could have died if Leafsong didn't find us before a fox or badger did, and then we wouldn't be here in ThunderClan. We owe ThunderClan literally our lives; hating someone—you—who was in the same position as us, in a way, doesn't help with that, only hurts."

"Speaking of hurt," Bravepaw murmured, stretching forward to sniff Frostdrop's still-bleeding shoulder-wound, "you need to get that taken care of." He jumped off the log and began sniffing around. Leafsong shrank back further to remain from being seen as he

slowly walked in a direction.

Frostdrop's eyes grew wide with fear. "Oh no, Bravepaw, I don't want to go back there so soon! Let's wait until they leave for the Gathering, okay?"

By the time she finished speaking, however, Bravepaw was racing back and hopped onto the log again, this time with an herb in his mouth. "Here, crouch down," he instructed the she-cat through the mouthful. He began chewing it up and spat it on the wound. After he spread the poultice along the injury, he took the cobwebs that were clinging around his paw and stuck them neatly in the wound. Finally, he licked off the blood from the silver, white-dappled pelt. "Who said we had to go back now?" he purred with a rare mischievous twinkle in his green eyes.

Frostdrop looked at Bravepaw to the cleaned wound and back. "I forgot that Leafsong said that you would make a good medicine cat. Thank you, Bravepaw." She leaned toward him and licked his cheek.

"And thank you for taking Whitesnake's blow for me. For standing up for me, in general."

Frostdrop's ears slightly flattened. "No one else seemed like they were going to," she growled, both anger and sadness making her eyes glow. "I *hate* seeing others being put down like that—*bullied* like that. I don't see the point of it. Leaders are already a higher rank than warriors. Power is nothing. There is..."

Frostdrop's voice faded away as Leafsong quietly made her way back to the camp, giving the two young cats the private time they originally needed. She had no clue that Frostdrop was capable of that sort of courage when she had faced Whitesnake, and it was as if she could pour out all her thoughts to Bravepaw, no matter what it was. Her heart warmed from the two, like a pair of outsiders coming together to make a family.

When Leafsong reached the camp, she stopped to wait for the departing cats who were streaming out of the thorn tunnel. Firestar was standing to the side, watching his Clan get organized, until he

noticed Leafsong and turned to her.

"Are you and Bravepaw still coming?" he asked her. "Whitesnake is prohibited to go to the Gathering tonight, so he will stay here."

Leafsong shook her head. "I don't feel that great, anyway. I'll stay here. Bravepaw—"

"I will still go to the Gathering, Firestar," Bravepaw replied. She spun around and saw the tom and Frostdrop padding side by side, pelts barely touching, through the forest toward her and Firestar. "If you will allow it, I am sure Squirrelflight would be glad to watch over me as well as Darkpaw." His gaze searched out the ginger she-cat, who stepped forward with eager eyes.

"I'd love to," she responded. They looked at Firestar for approval, who nodded. Squirrelflight stepped closer to Leafsong and pressed her muzzle against the she-cat's cheek. "I will tell you everything that happens in the morning."

"Sounds good," Leafsong purred.

Once all the chosen cats were crowding outside the camp, Firestar, beside Brambleclaw, set out and led the way down to the lakeshore. Leafsong began walking the opposite was and made her own path toward the lake.

Eventually, the still reflection of the night sky appeared between the trunks and leaves of the vegetation. She found her paws taking her down the pebbly shore. As she looked out at the lake, she noticed an abrupt break in the star-strewn water. Her eyes adjusted to the moon's light, and she recognized it as the fallen log. She continued forward when her paws were submerged in the shallows of the lake. The sudden raise of the floor underneath jolted Leafsong upward, and she braced her paws on the wet, slippery wood as it lead he rout of the water. She carefully walked to the furthest end of the log, crouched, and looked down at the water below.

Her head's black silhouette caused a break in the sky's reflection, showing stars surrounding the blackness and the moon to the side,

and her glowing eyes stared back up at her. It would have been a beautiful and magnificent sight if it did not instantly bring the thought of StarClan back to Leafsong. A small rumbling began in her throat.

"Why?" she whispered softly at first. Her voice gradually grew louder and fiercer. "Why do you do this?" Her head jerks up and she glares at the blinking, icy stars above. "Why do you make me the Chosen Warrior, and then leave me? 'We will always be with you.'" She snorted and hissed aggressively, "Fox dung! Some ancestors you are. Do you not care about your kin here anymore all of a sudden?" She pushed herself up and stood rigidly on the log, her claws making marks on the wood. "Why didn't you just make Stone or Lichen the Chosen Warrior instead of me? They wanted it more, and it could have prevented them from becoming the lost rogues they are!"

The pale ginger she-cat's heart was racing, and her blood boiled with rage. Her keen, green eyes pierced the pinprick stars as she rapidly glanced at each and every one of them.

"Answer me, StarClan!"

Leafsong's screech rang out across the lake and up to the sky. Following it, the sound of close thunder boomed behind her, but that was not the cause of her spinning around on the log.

"It's true, then. You *are* the Chosen Warrior."

"What do you want now, Whitesnake?" she hissed, now glaring at the tom standing on the shore more than halfway up to the lake's edge, his gray fur turned silver by the moonlight. She was in such a blind rage that Leafsong didn't fully process the words he just said.

"What do I want?" Whitesnake snorted and looked at her directly in the eye. "What *do* I want, Leafsong?"

Leafsong snarled. "Whitesnake, we've already gone over this. I'm sorry for making your mother leave the Clans. It was necessary at the time... and I do regret it. I'm sorry."

"'Sorry' doesn't bring her back," he growled in reply. "I have no idea where she is now. I don't even know if she's still alive!"

There was a pause of silence as Leafsong did not respond.

"But what I do know is that she tried to kill you," he continued. "It was her mission to kill the Chosen Warrior. And since she failed to complete that mission, I will do it for her."

Then Whitesnake sprinted across the rest of the shore, seemingly jumped over the three fox-length gap of water and reached the log. He clambered up it so quickly that Leafsong had no time to react before he pounced forward with his unsheathed claws out in front of him and knocked her off her paws. The impact of the cool water hitting her back caused her breath to escape from inside her, and before she knew it, she was flailing her paws around desperately in the surrounding, deep water, trying to resurface.

Her head broke the surface, but something beneath her dragged her back under just after she took a huge breath. A sharp pain shot through her as Whitesnake bit her on the upper foreleg and even though the water was black from the night, a darker liquid was barely visible, that of which she knew was her blood. She opened her mouth to let out a pained yowl, but water poured into it and choked her. As she tried to cough, her desperation to get air increased. Using all the strength she had, Leafsong pushed at Whitesnake, who still had his jaws on her leg, and tried to make her way upward, but the large tom would not budge from her side. The longer she struggled, the more her vision began to go black from lack of oxygen. Her movements slowed, and as she tried to claw at Whitesnake's cheek, she could tell that it left no mark on his skin. Eventually, her lungs screaming for air and aching, she felt her muscles relax and went limp.

She did not even notice Whitesnake letting go of her and go to the surface by himself. The she-cat, however, did not care about being able to breathe anymore. Leafsong embraced the dark, cool water surrounding her as she slowly sank down to the bottom, welcoming her to its own world. The ache inside of her became a part of her, and the silence beneath the surface was the most peaceful sound she had ever heard before. She was one with the lake now, and she

accepted it.

Sudden pressure was against the back of Leafsong's neck, and she faintly felt a small tug. The water around her brushed against her fur as she was dragged upward, as if it were saying good-bye to her. Several long heartbeats passed before something different than water pressed around her head, and she was jerked up and down, gliding through the water. The rough pebbles rubbed against her as she was dragged up the shore until she was finally dropped on the ground. More heartbeats passed as Leafsong lied there, her flank moving slightly every now and again, if any. A sudden flash of light lit up her eyelids. Thunder shook the earth, and then rain began pouring down.

And then the coughing came.

Her body shook with each cough, and with each cough also came a mouthful of water. Much time passed with lightning and thunder accompanying by the time Leafsong stopped and took her first deep breath. The clean air scraped at her raw throat and made her lungs burn. She continued to lie still, breathing rapidly and with a piddle of lake water near her head, no thoughts going through her mind.

It wasn't until her breathing became close to regular, though her heart was racing, did she notice that there was someone present on the shore with her, their paws shifting the pebbles around with each step they took. Slowly, Leafsong lifted her head as much as she could and turned to look at the cat. Through the darkness, she saw the form of a muscular tom pacing back and forth a few tail-lengths in front of her. A flash of lightning showed his gray fur and white stripe.

It took her a moment, but then the memories returned to Leafsong in a rush: her yowling at StarClan; Whitesnake confronting her on the log and then pushing her into the water; the sense of comfort while waiting for the lake to claim her. She opened her mouth to speak, but all she could manage to croak softly was his name.

That was enough to get Whitesnake's attention. He halted in his pacing and looked at her. She figured it was her head being messed up from the water, but as another flash of light came, she thought

she saw a glint of relief sitting in his eyes. He took a step forward, his tail swinging to and fro slightly.

"I can't kill you," he began simply in a low voice. He shook his head a couple times. "I couldn't let you die. I know that you're the Chosen Warrior, and I know what happens if you die, at least by the paws of another cat. If my mother wasn't blinded by the pain and misery in her life, I am positive she would have never wanted you dead. She only wanted someone to take her anger out on to blame. Yes, to punish the Clans, but up to them all falling apart? That, I am not sure of."

He took a few more steps closer to Leafsong and crouched down next to her although his gaze now remained focus on the pebbles beneath his paws. The she-cat's head was still clogged with water, so her own thoughts did not come well, but she could still hear Whitesnake talk clearly. Even if she wanted to say anything, she was too curious—and almost *enjoying*—in his sudden change of word tone.

"I know that you have already told me sorry about Swiftclaw," Whitesnake continued. Along with the lowness of his voice in the rain and thunder, it also sounded as if he were speaking from a distance, that he was several fox-lengths away and not paying attention to any of his surroundings. Only the words that flowed out of his mouth. "But now it's my turn: I'm sorry about everything that's been happening between us these recent days. If anything, *I* am the one who caused this. I shouldn't have pressured you about my mother—but how could I not? She's my mother!" He took a heavy breath. "And I trusted *her*. I guess I was blinded with my own rage and loss of my mother and couldn't clearly see her plans..."

Leafsong saw the tom stare out into the forest, his gaze fixed on a distant thing not physically there. It took her a couple heartbeats to realize he wasn't talking about Swiftclaw. She barely thought of what she would say when she murmured absently, "Owlheart. You trained with Owlheart."

Whitesnake jerked his head toward her and stared at her with slightly-widened eyes. "How do you know who Owlheart is?" he asked suspiciously. "I never mentioned her."

"She was my mentor in the Dark Forest before you came," she responded simply.

"Get away from her, Whitesnake!"

The sharp snarl cutting through the stormy, night air prevented any response from Whitesnake to be uttered. Both of the cats moved their gazes to the source and saw Darkpaw sprinting down the shore from the forest toward them. Whitesnake pushed himself up and took a couple paces forward. Within a few heartbeats, the apprentice had reached them, and he rushed behind Whitesnake, shoved him hard to get him away from Leafsong, and positioned himself in front of the she-cat. His paws were planted firmly on the pebbles with claws unsheathed, and he was crouched with bunched muscles, ready to attack. His amber eyes were narrowed and glowing with loathing as he looked at Whitesnake.

"Leave her alone," the black tom growled threateningly, "unless you want that nice, white stripe of yours stained red with your own blood."

Whitesnake stood a tail-length away. He showed no expression as he gazed at Darkpaw, then Leafsong, and back again. Only a few heartbeats passed until the gray tom turned around and, without saying a word, walked slowly up the shore and disappeared into the forest.

Darkpaw straightened up a bit, blinking in surprise at how easily he made Whitesnake leave, and then spun around and rushed to crouch at Leafsong's side. "Leafsong, are you all right? What did he do to you?"

The pale ginger she-cat, her fur still soaked and clinging to her skin, summoned enough strength to push herself up on her belly and tucked her paws beneath her. Keeping her voice to a low and soft one for the benefit of both preventing anyone lurking in the forest from hearing an dot not put much strain on her raw throat, she responded, "He... he tried to drown me in the lake. And he almost did. But then he saved me."

Darkpaw stared at her with confusion and danger. "Why would he

try to kill you and then all of a sudden decide to save you?" he sneered.

She thought for a moment to find the right answer. Looking into the forest where she last saw Whitesnake, she murmured, "I guess he just realized what he was actually doing and turned his rage at me toward Owlheart, who corrupted him into doing this."

"You know who Owlheart is?"

Leafsong's attention snapped back to Darkpaw, and they shared a stare with wide, shocked eyes. *Oh, please don't have him being trained by her, too!* she desperately pleaded inwardly. "How do you know her?" she asked quickly, heart pounding.

"Well, I never met her before," he began, and Leafsong relaxed a stone's worth, "but a strange cat once came to me and said, 'If you meet a she-cat named Owlheart, do not listen to her. Do not trust her. Get away from her as soon as you can.'"

Leafsong was relieved to know that Owlheart had not come to Darkpaw, but it was instantly replaced with overwhelmed curiosity and, a feeling that seemed so unfamiliar to her now, hope. "Who was this cat? What did they look like?" Her voice was growing stronger as she forgot about the scratching when she spoke with her increasing excitement. She also realized that the rain had stopped, and the thunder was not as loud, nor the lightning as often.

"She was... err... silver, I think. With darker gray spots. And her fur looked like it was shimmering or something."

Leafsong leaned forward. "How long ago did she come, then?"

"About three or four moons ago now." He looked at Leafsong with a blank stare as she kept quiet when he continued slightly eagerly. "But she came to me again when I was traveling with the other cats going to the Gathering tonight. I don't think anyone else saw her. This time she told me not to go to the Gathering and go to the lakeshore instead. She told me to come here, to you."

Leafsong's heart was pounding. Was it true? "Rainshine?" The name

flowed out of her mouth like a majestic waterfall. Her legs were shaking, but she forced herself to stand, stumbling twice in her efforts. Darkpaw got up, too, and pressed up against her for support, but she didn't notice him. Her eyes were focused on something far away and she turned around. A large gap in the sky revealed the full moon and the stars around it as the clouds broke apart. She refocused her eyes on the cleared sky overhead. "Rainshine?" she called again to the sky loudly and clearly. "StarClan?" Her shuddering caused her to drop to a crouch, but to Leafsong, it was a bow. "You haven't abandoned me after all," she mumbled ecstatically.

"Leafsong," came Darkpaw's concerned meow, "are you okay? What's going on?"

The she-cat straightened up and gazed at him directly in his glowing, amber eyes, her own green ones filled with a mixture of all positive emotions. "Darkpaw, I need to tell you something very important: I am the Chosen Warrior."

~*~*~*~*~*~

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Chapter 12

Leafsong lied in her nest restlessly with her eyes wide open. One of her paws subconsciously tore at the moss with its claws as she thought about all StarClan, Rainshine, Whitesnake, and Owlheart. Darkpaw was in the warriors' den with her, crouching behind her and running his tail soothingly along her flank.

"They should be back from the Gathering any moment now," the tom murmured as he nuzzled behind her ear.

Just as he finished saying that, Mousewhisker and Sandstorm entered the den. Mousewhisker's jaw stretched open in a yawn, and Sandstorm gave a nod of acknowledgement to Leafsong and Darkpaw before the both of them curled up in their own nests.

"Or I guess right now," Darkpaw corrected himself. "Let's go see Squirrelflight and see what happened there." He began walking toward the exit and then turned back toward Leafsong. "Do you need help getting up?" he asked, concerned.

In answer and half in a daze, Leafsong slowly pushed herself to her feet and followed the black apprentice out.

"Leafsong!"

The she-cat glanced up as her name was called and saw Squirrelflight standing and beckoning her tail near the edge of the clearing. She waited until Darkpaw moved forward to follow him over to the orange she-cat.

"Hi, Darkpaw," Squirrelflight greeted her apprentice. "I was surprised that you didn't want to go to the Gathering. Do you mind me asking why? You left in a hurry. And Leafsong"—she looked at her—"you seem like you're really in a daze..." Her ears flattened and her eyes grew wide with sudden worry. "What *happened?"*

With a sideways glance at Leafsong, Darkpaw replied, "It's a pretty

long and complex story. We'll tell you later. But for now, what happened at the Gathering?"

Squirrelflight began to shuffle her paws on the sandy floor. "I would love to say it was the usual, but 'usual' doesn't even begin to describe this Gathering. Remember when we were... *patrolling* along the ShadowClan border the other day and overheard a few cats complaining about RiverClan? Apparently a large rivalry is growing between the two Clans from a hunting problem. What I got out of all the chaos was that most of ShadowClan's prey have vanished because of the drought and recent forest fire, so they started hunting some of RiverClan's prey. The ShadowClan cats were arguing that RiverClan have plenty of fish in the rivers and lake to catch, especially that the short but heavy rains filled up the water level more."

Leafsong stared at the orange warrior, and, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Darkpaw glance at her again. *Am I going to have to bring peace between the two Clans?* she wondered, her heart dropping. *I already have so much on my mind...* She swallowed. She decided to change the subject a bit. "Where's Bravepaw?" she asked, glancing around the hollow. "Did he do well at the Gathering?"

Squirrelflight nodded. "I think so. Not the greatest first Gathering you could go to, but I barely had to tell him anything, or really watch over him in general. Seemed like Frostdrop willingly took on that task, and happily." She motioned her tail and sent a mischievous look in a direction.

Leafsong followed her gaze and saw that Frostdrop and Bravepaw were lying next to each other and murmuring in a conversation, there pelts barely brushing against one another. "Well, it's good to know that he's being accepted as a cat of ThunderClan," she mused. Glancing back at Squirrelflight, she began heading toward the thorn tunnel. "Come on. We'll tell you what happened away from the Gathering now."

Her paws instinctively took her toward the shore, but Leafsong forced herself to stop at the trunk of the Ancient Oak. Darkpaw sat down next to her on a large root. Squirrelflight stood facing the two, curiosity and concern mingling in her expression.

Before Darkpaw could utter another word for her, Leafsong told everything from the very beginning: of why Whitesnake was so angry at her in the first place; of her finding out that Owlheart was training him in the Dark Forest; of her abandonment of StarClan, and StarClan's thought-to-be abandonment of her; and then, finally, of the night's happenings.

"Whitesnake was saying at the end about how blindly he trusted Owlheart," Leafsong finished. "He couldn't think clearly with his constant thoughts about his mother, and then his rage at me. Owlheart only took advantage of him..."

Silence finally stretched out among the three cats. A thought leading off from Leafsong's last statement began to slowly form in her mind, but Squirrelflight said it before she could.

"Do you think Owlheart told Whitesnake to kill you?"

She glanced at the orange she-cat and then to Darkpaw. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "It would be very possible, though. He'd said that since Swiftclaw failed her mission, he would finish it for her."

"What about her convincing Swiftclaw to kill you?" Squirrelflight wondered again.

Leafsong shook her head. "Again, I'm not sure. I think Swiftclaw originally wanted me dead just for her own wishes, and because of the pain she had in her life. But I can easily see Owlheart using that pain for her own benefit and sort of aligning herself with Swiftclaw."

"If Owlheart wants you dead, can't she just try to kill you herself?" Darkpaw eventually mused. He lowered his voice as if paranoid that the she-cat could hear him all the way from the devilish place she lived. "I mean, you go to the Dark Forest a lot. I would think it would be easy for her to get close to you even if you're not mentor and apprentice anymore."

Leafsong turned on Darkpaw with a look filled with sudden terror.

"Sorry..." he apologized, flattening his ears and his eyes growing

wide with truth.

"That *is* true though," Leafsong admitted with a soft growl. "I just hope Whitesnake doesn't go back there."

"And what about you?" Squirrelflight pushed after a few heartbeats of silence. "You're not going back to the Dark Forest with that in your head now, are you? Please tell me you aren't!"

Leafsong's thoughts went to Wolfscar and Nightblaze. Leaving Wolfscar would be absolutely fine with her. She'll never know her first harsh punishment form his; it could be anything. But how could she leave Nightblaze? He has been the only Dark Forest cat who has truly been kind to her, and told her that he saw Whitesnake being trained by Owlheart. And something seemed almost *different* about him than the other Dark Forest warriors she had met. There wasn't always a heavy, dark aroma hanging around him, and leaving him with Wolfscar seems just as cruel as there mentor was.

But she could never be so sure of what Owlheart is planning to do. Yes, she may want to have Leafsong dead, but what if she didn't? She could have easily killed her the first night Leafsong woke up in the Dark Forest.

"I don't know," Leafsong gave her excuse of an answer. "We don't *know* if she wants me dead or not. But I'll be on extra alert for her if I do go to the Dark Forest again, okay?" She gazed at Squirrelflight with promising eyes until the warrior nodded, however rather hesitantly.

Leafsong padded the few paces forward to reach her and pressed her muzzle to her cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you most of this stuff earlier, Squirrelflight," she murmured softly. "I know I should have. You are one of the most trustworthy, if not *the* most trustworthy, cat in my life. I have just been so overwhelmed with everything happening. I hope you can understand that."

"Of course I understand!" Squirrelflight chirped. "You can't help it. You're the—" She cut herself off and tense up slightly.

"The Chosen Warrior."

Both Leafsong and Squirrelflight pulled away from each other and looked at Darkpaw, who was still sitting on the tree root.

"Leafsong told me not too long ago," he calmly explained.

For a short moment, Squirrelflight looked at Leafsong, then Darkpaw, and back again with eyes shining ecstatically. "We better get going back to the camp now. We've been out here for quite a while." She yawned and stated, "I'm exhausted!"

As Squirrelflight began to walk back toward the camp, Leafsong glanced down the shore at the fallen log in the water. "You go on ahead of me," she called. "I'm going to stay here a bit longer." Looking at Darkpaw, she added, "You, too, alright? Get some sleep."

"As long as you promise me you'll sleep, too, since you didn't while waiting for the Clan's return," the black tom countered with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Leafsong returned the look. "Fine. Now, go." She nudged the apprentice with a paw and then made her way down the shore after making sure he was following his mentor. Before she knew it, she was crouched at the end of the log, looking down into the water below. She studied her reflection on the surface and the colorful sky around her. Most of the clouds had blown away, and the sun was rising steadily to start the new day. The familiar, calming noises of the small breeze whistling in her ears, rustling the leaves in the forest behind her, and unsettling the water played like a melody, soothing her. All her anger from the previous time she was in this spot, from just last night, had vanished like dew evaporating in the morning sun.

The warrior continued to focus on the lake surface, enjoying the quiet surroundings and the sun warming her pelt. As the sun rose, she noticed that its light was starting to reflect on the water. Deciding to watch one of the light specks, she gazed at it as it danced on the surface. However, as she continued to watch it, she noticed that the light speck was slowly changing its form. Moving her attention to a larger span of the lake, Leafsong saw that all of

the light specks were changing their form. Again, she transferred her focus to the entirety of the lake itself. The sight caused her to push herself to her feet and suck in a quick breath.

All across the lake's surface, small light specks were strewn, and each had shaped into a perfect circle, a dot.

"Like stars," Leafsong whispered subconsciously.

Her ear twitched as water splashed beneath her. She looked down and saw that an area was wilder than the rest of the lake. Water went side to side and stirred up decent waves below her, sometimes splashing up and sprinkling on her face. With no warning, the water surged upward, forcing Leafsong to jump back on the log and turn her head away. The sound of water hitting water reached her ears, and then all was silent. She turned back toward the end of the log and lifted a paw up to move forward, but she instantly froze, and her eyes went wide as she stared at who was in front of her.

"Rainshine!" she wailed. Emotion immediately overwhelmed her as she gazed at the starry, silver-spotted she-cat floating above the water, level with her. She rushed to the end of the log and stretched out her neck to briefly touch noses with the StarClan warrior before pulling back and frantically trying to say words while being chokes with fondness.

"Leafsong." The sound of her name made Leafsong stop and gaze at Rainshine. The sparkling she-cat looked at her with love and remorse. "Let me explain. Please."

The pale ginger she-cat closed her mouth and nodded, waiting for Rainshine to speak.

The StarClan cat let out a sigh before starting, "Every Chosen Warrior has gone through this, feeling like StarClan has left them. Including me. But it is only a test—a mouse-brained test"—she hissed under her breath—"to see how well the Chosen Warrior can take care of his- or herself without the help of StarClan."

"Shouldn't you be the one to decide to do this 'test' or not?" Leafsong asked. A small anger was beginning to rise within her. "You are the

previous Chosen Warrior! You should have a voice in this situation."

Rainshine shook her head slowly. "I guess it's StarClan's overall decision. I did try to convince them, however, not to continue this stupid test... I obviously failed. And if I tried to go to you, even just to watch you, they held me back. I'm sorry, Leafsong."

Leafsong flinched from her words and attitude. "Don't be sorry, Rainshine!" You couldn't prevent this. But everything is fine now, since the test is over." She replayed her anger she had toward StarClan during the test, remorse growing inside of her. *But I didn't know it was only a test. I'm sure they will forgive me... if I forgive them.* Her thoughts then went to Darkpaw and how he had met Rainshine, twice now. "How come they let you go to Darkpaw, then?"

Rainshine looked at her. "I managed to convince them to at least allow me to speak to Darkpaw at some points. However, I had to swear an oath that I would not go to you. Since I couldn't protect you, I wanted to protect Darkpaw. Last night was the end of the test, so they allowed me to finally watch you from StarClan. That was right when you were drowning beneath Whitesnake's paws. I figured I could talk to Darkpaw one last time and tell him to go to the shore, where he found you."

Leafsong blinked affectionately at her. "Thank you, then."

Rainshine's ears twitched. "Maybe that wasn't the last time I will talk to him," she mused. As Leafsong gazed at her, confused with her words, the silver-dotted she-cat leaned to the side a bit to look behind her. "Come on out, warrior," she called clearly. "There is no more use to stay all the way back there."

Leafsong spun around and saw Darkpaw emerge from the forest. She faced Rainshine again, the same confusion still plastered on her face. "Warrior? He's still an apprentice. He even has the 'paw' in his name."

Rainshine's whiskers twitched with amusement, and her eyes shone with a knowing. "Tell me, Leafsong. Does he really look like an apprentice to you?"

The she-cat turned around again and watched as Darkpaw made his way to the log. She studied the black tom: his muscles flexed beneath his pelt with each step he took; his strides were long and quick with his long legs; and his amber eyes glistened with both a playful and a serious nature, a strange combination, but he somehow made it work. As he reached the fallen log and clambered up toward Leafsong, she noticed that he was as tall as her, maybe even taller without the awkward slope of the log, and had the figure of a well-fed tom.

"Sorry I was kind of eavesdropping," he apologized. "I know you told me to go back and sleep, but I was too worried about you, Leafsong. I mean, you know what happened last time you came here."

Leafsong smiled at him and licked his ear. "I understand, and I appreciate how much you care about me." The two cats gazed at each other for a couple heartbeats before Leafsong meowed, "Darkpaw, I believe you already know who this is." She faced the StarClan cat and motioned her tail toward her. "This is Rainshine. She was the Chosen Warrior before me."

The apprentice gazed in awe at the starry she-cat and then bowed his head at her. "Thank you so much, Rainshine, for telling me to go here, and for telling me to avoid Owlheart." He looked up at her. "Leafsong told me that Whitesnake was being trained by her. You knew that, too, didn't you?"

Rainshine gave a single, solemn nod. "Yes, I did." She looked at Leafsong. "I knew that if she convinced you to be trained by her that Leafsong would never forgive herself." She returned her gaze to Darkpaw. "But that still applies to you now. Avoid Owlheart for as long as you can."

Darkpaw dipped his head. "I never threw it away. Thank you for everything."

Rainshine then took a few steps forward to be a mouse-length away from Leafsong's muzzle. She gazed deeply into her forest green eyes, her own blue ones full of love and seriousness. "Whenever you need any help or comfort from here on out, I will *always* be there. I

promise there are no other tests or anything that will prevent me from reaching you. Do you understand?"

Leafsong nodded immediately. "I understand completely," she purred. "Thank you, Rainshine."

The StarClan she-cat leaned forward and touched Leafsong's nose with her own, following it with touching Darkpaw's nose. With that, she vanished, leaving several sparkles to float down to the water below. Leafsong sat down with a sigh again at the end of the log and looked out at the lake, where the light speck-stars still remained.

"Is everything fine?" Darkpaw asked as he came up and sat next to her.

"As fine as everything can be right now," the warrior responded. Then, almost subconsciously, she leaned to the side into Darkpaw's flank.

Before she realized what she was doing, she felt Darkpaw's tongue run gently over her head once. She allowed herself to nuzzle the tom's shoulder for a couple heartbeats before he lightly rested his chin in the top of her head.

In that moment she shared with Darkpaw, all of Leafsong's current worries were stored away to make room for the relish she felt. With the temporary but serene peace floating like a cloud in the air around them, the two cats gazed out together at the starry waters in perfect silence.

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Epilogue

"Ready, set, go!"

Leafsong bolted forward, running as quickly as she could. She concentrated hard to avoid all of the trunks and undergrowth that acted as obstacles coming up quickly before her. A couple tail-lengths beside her, Darkpaw did the same. She realized that sprinting from the Ancient Oak all the way to the abandoned Twoleg nest was a long distance and would tire her out, but she did not want to lose to the tom. She forced her legs to go faster and noticed her slowly pulling ahead of Darkpaw. The she-cat let out a small yowl of pride.

But that pride did not last long as the black tom rushed past her as fast as a fish in a river, his tail streaming out behind him. Leafsong urged her legs to go even faster, but they refused. Suddenly, she lurched downward and slammed into the ground as a stray bramble tendril tangled itself around her back foot and tripped her. As she tried to free herself, she growled a curse as she watched Darkpaw disappear into the forest beyond. "How can he be *that* fast?" she asked the air around her. "Is he related to rabbits somehow?" Even though she was acting quite rude, she could not help admiring the fact that he *was* that fast.

Just as she freed and recovered herself from the hard fall, the piercing sound of yowling reached her ears. Instantly forgetting about the race, Leafsong strained her ears to determine where it was coming from. As she did, the yowl became more apparent to whose it was. "Is that...?" She didn't care about finishing her spoken thought as she ran towards the noise, her legs seeming to not be tired from the running she already did.

The yowling grew louder and nearer as Leafsong hurried toward it. Before she knew it, she rounded a tree and was staring at the cat who was the source. "Whitesnake?"

The gray tom was clawing at a tree trunk, his yowls as fierce as if he were in an actual battle. At the sound of his name, the warrior paused with one paw in mid-scrape on the bark and turned his head to see Leafsong.

The she-cat rushed up to him. "Whitesnake, calm down."

"Calm down?" He dropped down onto all fours to face Leafsong properly, his claws still unsheathed. The fierce movement and intense gaze he gave her forced the she-cat to skid to a stop and take a couple footsteps back. "How do you expect me to *calm down?"* he snarled, his tail lashing. "My *mother* is out there, somewhere, all alone. Being miserable because of everything she's lost. She's probably wishing she'll just die—if she isn't dead already. And then one of my sisters hasn't talked or even *looked* at me for almost ten days now. *Ten."* He glared into her eyes. "Tell me—how do you expect me to calm down, Leafsong?"

Leafsong only gazed at him with wide, concerned, pitiful eyes for a long moment. When she found her voice, all she whispered softly was, "You *really* want your mother back, don't you?"

Whitesnake closed his eyes and his muscles relaxed a little. "Yes, I do. I want her back more than anything. If she were still here in the Clans, none of this would have happened."

"I am truly sorry that I made her leave, Whitesnake. I thought it was the only way at the time... But I gradually started thinking better of my choice, and especially when you came along, the regret grew overwhelming, just like it is right now."

"Don't blame yourself," the tom murmured. "I know Swiftclaw brought this upon herself. But I think that she thought what she did was the only way at the time, too." He paused. "At least I still have some of my family..." He trailed off and then slammed his head into the nearby claw-marked trunk. "Frostdrop will never forgive me!"

"Hey," Leafsong tried to comfort, walking slowly up beside him, "she's got to be missing Swiftclaw too, right? And same with Shiningice."

"And then there's the part where almost the entire Clan hates me because of how I treated Bravepaw, and especially when I accidently scratched Frostdrop." He took a deep breath and let it out in a long, heavy sigh. "I just need redemption. But where in StarClan's name would I start?"

A thought immediately appeared inside Leafsong's head. Almost casually, she suggested, "You could go out and find Swiftclaw."

Whitesnake whipped his head toward her and stared at her with wide eyes. "What?" he breathed.

Leafsong just then realized how great of an idea that it actually was. "You can leave the Clans to find your mother and bring her back to the Clans!"

The tom looked at her with awestruck eyes. "You're serious about this?"

She nodded once, firmly.

He fumbled for words for a few heartbeats before he put together, "But I'd need to get Firestar's permission first." His gaze strayed elsewhere as they filled with despondency, his shoulders sagging.

However, Leafsong shook her head, reading his thoughts from his actions. "Don't worry—I can convince Firestar to let you go."

The gray tom looked at Leafsong with his eyes overwhelming with several emotions. "You really want me to do this? To bring Swiftclaw back?"

"Yes." She closed the gap between them and pressed her muzzle against his cheek. "I would go with you, because I am the one who made her leave in the first place, but you know that the Clans would be at great risk for danger without me. And what if something happens here when I'm gone, or it I—if I die so far away from the Clans? But this is *your* redemption, Whitesnake—or, in this case, your family's redemption. Frostdrop will be perfectly fine here with Bravepaw, but I think Shiningice should go with you."

She pulled back and looked at Whitesnake with his gratefulness-

filled green eyes. "Thank you so much, Leafsong. You have no idea how much this means to me."

Leafsong grinned back. "Oh, I think I have some sort of an idea."

"There you are! I figured you weren't *that* slow. I was—oh, it's *you."*

Both Leafsong and Whitesnake turned to see Darkpaw standing a few fox-lengths away. The pale-ginger she-cat glanced at the tom beside her to see if he was affected by the harsh words, but his eyes were still shining as brightly as before.

"Darkpaw, lay off him a bit. He's not who he once was."

The black tom seemed semi-shocked at her response, but quickly shook it off. "Whatever. I'm getting pretty hungry, though. Race you back to the camp!"

He was already sprinting again through the forest before he finished speaking. Leafsong began to take a few steps forward and then flicked her tail at Whitesnake. "Come on," she purred, "you heard him. Let's go!" She turned back around and rushed after Darkpaw. Whitesnake followed close behind, a new purpose restoring the lift within him.

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Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Be on the look out for the next book! (Whenever that will come out...)

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SIXTH BOOK!!!

ATTENTION READER!! This is just a quick message informing you that after 3 years, the sequel to *Starry Waters* and the sixth and final book of the original Chosen Warrior series is finally out and completed!!

Go check out Final Darkness!!!